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The Comic Hero In The Works Of Moliere

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THE COMIC HERO IN THE WORKS OF MOLIÈRE

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ABSTRACT

Eleven individuals of focal significance are selected from the comedies of Molière. They are designated Comic Heroes and presented as forming both the dramatic and the thematic centre of the plays in which they appear. Despite individual differences, they are considered to resemble each other in one essential feature: their egotism or all-consuming mania. This mania may take various forms, such as hypochondria, avarice, or misanthropy; but these forms are only the embodiment of the ever-present basic condition.

Dramatically, the Comic Hero is the central point around which the other characters revolve. These are analysed into five groups, each of which interacts with the Comic Hero in a different way and reveals a different aspect of his nature. The Young People show his egotism in action in the plot; the Raisonneurs his philosphy; the Wives his past and background; the Servants his impractical side; and the Parasites and Caricatures his blindness.

Thematically, the Comic Hero stands at the centre of the play's moral and comic structure. The moral theme is shown in his inevitable decline from a position of complete authority to one in which he is forced to allow the other characters to take control of their own lives. The Comic theme is displayed in his own character and in the reaction which he causes in those who surround him. In himself he is comic because of his blindness towards the external world. Being self-centred, he creates a world of his own, according to whose rules he lives. Consequently, there is a discrepancy between what he does and what his situation requires.

This is a source of comic amusement: the most extreme case arises when the Comic Hero unknowingly controverts his own purposes. In addition, he gives the impetus to many comic features of the behaviour of the secondary characters. Thus the women servants have amusing quarrels with him, and the Parasites profit materially from his blindness. Lastly, there is a moral element in the amusement of the audience, for they take pleasure in the defeat of the Comic Hero's plans to tyrannise over others.

In sum, the dominating figure of the Comic Hero represents the focal point, from the dramatic, thematic, and comic points of view, of the plays in which he appears.

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Purpose: Examination of the Comic Hero

In this study we will suggest an approach to certain major works of Molière. This approach will be based on a conception of Molière as a creator of character above all. We will attempt to show that the dramatic and thematic centre of the plays selected here is a particular type of character whom we shall designate as the Comic Hero. Each of the plays selected contains one such individual; only one (L'Étourdi) contains more than one. Each of the comic heroes treated here resembles the others in certain striking and unmistakable ways. The principal trait common to them all is the way in which they dominate and seek to dominate over every other character in the plays in which they appear. Dramatically, they are the focal point around which all the other characters revolve, for they embody a particular vice which sets them against the other characters, and provides the motive force for the plot. They conflict with those who surround them, and from these various conflicts there emerges a picture of a dominating central individual. This fact provides the basis of our method of analysis: dividing the secondary characters into five groups, we examine the way in which each group conflicts with the Comic Hero. Each group reveals a different aspect of his character because each group has its own particular attitude and personality. By combining these five different impressions, we arrive at a composite portrait of the Comic Hero. Thus the conception with which we started, that of a dominating individual, is shown to be valid from a dramatic point of view, insofar as the action and physical movement of the play tend towards the portrayal of this individual.

Having established the dramatic importance of the Comic Hero in Molière, we would go farther. So dominant an individual could not fail to have comic significance, for Molière's plays are after all comedies; and if the plays do suggest any moral attitude, the Comic Hero must surely play some role in the expression of it. Taking this central concept, therefore, we explore its implications for the nature of comedy and the moral attitude in Molière. Of the traits displayed in common by these individuals, the most significant is the desire to dominate over others, to pursue a mania so exclusively that it becomes the sole object of one's desires, and thus to neglect or unfeelingly employ other people in the service of this object.[1] All Molière's Comic Heroes display this flaw; and all of them are defeated in the end. They remain unrepentant, clinging to their vice, but their hold over others is broken. Starting out with a certain mania, they spend the entire period of the play in an attempt to submit others to it, but in the end their plans come to naught. Such symmetry of dramatic development can only indicate that Molière constantly treats the same moral theme, and consistently implies a moral attitude: that the attempt to impose one's ego on others is a bad thing.

Thus we claim that the plays treated here do contain a moral judgment. To offer a comprehensive view of Molière, we need to link these two concepts

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[1] cf. the detailed analysis of certain individuals given by Lionel Gossman [Men and Masks: A Study of Molière (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963], and A.J. Krailsheimer [Studies in Self-Interest (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962]. Both these authors classify a number of individuals into a "famille d'esprit"; Gossman sees their similarity as a "monstrous vanity" (p. 81), while for Krailsheimer they are "clinical cases of persons otherwise normal afflicted by monomania" (p. 172).

of character and moral attitude with one more: the nature of the comic in his plays. Precisely this is the ultimate object of this study. Without wishing to suggest a universally valid theory of the comic, we intend to offer a conception of the comic as it is found in the pages of Molière. This conception is based on the central idea of the Comic Hero. Since the latter is of fundamental importance in the thematic and dramatic structure of the plays, we may presume that he is of equal significance on the plane of the comic. Starting with the conception of the hero given above - his egocentricity and desire to impose his particular mania on everyone else - we examine the consequences of this behaviour for the hero himself. The most significant consequence is the psychological blindness which it brings upon him. So obsessed is he by the desire to pursue his monomania to the exclusion of all else, that he loses his awareness of all other factors. He subjects the world outside him (and indeed the human side of his own character) to a one-sided view, a perspective created and existing only in his own mind. Thus he deliberately renders himself incapable of considering any other point of view. He is blind to everything but his own interpretation of the world. However, the world is not so accommodating as toconfine itself within these narrow limits. What the Comic Hero sees is very different from what actually happens; and it is from this incongruity, this divergence between reality and his vision of it, that the comic arises. We laugh at Sganarelle of L'École des Maris[2] when he becomes the messenger between Isabelle and Valère, all the time believing that he is serving his own interests. A gap has opened between reality and his conception of it, and herein lies the origin of our amusement.

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[2]It will be recalled that Sganarelle intends to marry his ward, Isabelle, who in fact loves Valère. In order to communicate with the latter, Isabelle employs Sganarelle as her unknowing messenger.

The comic effect is greatly increased by the fact that Sganarelle himself is the cause of this divergence: he brings his fate upon himself. This essentially is the difference between comedy of character and comedy of situation. In the latter, misapprehension and confusion arise, and cause us to laugh, but they remain external or accidental. The dramatis personae are placed in situations by a twist of the plot imposed by the author, situations which are not of their own causing. Thus there is little connection between their inner nature and the reason why we laugh at them; in this sense, the comic effect is less profound. In the plays that we will treat here, however, the comedy arises from character, for the comic hero brings about the situations of the plot, and, eventually, his own downfall. Here we have comedy of character in the deepest sense, for plot, the comic, and moral significance are all rooted in the original conception of the central character.

The ultimate form of this is the situation in which the comic hero brings about his own downfall by the consistent application of the very plan which he hopes will ensure his triumph. To return to Sganarelle: so sure is he of himself that he becomes quite incapable of perceiving Isabelle's plan. Imposing his own rigid interpretation on everything, he becomes her willing servant, and ends by facilitating the very thing which he thinks he is rendering impossible: the marriage of Isabelle and Valère. He is quite clearly the major factor in his own defeat, and he plays this role precisely because of the blindness which his single-mindedness brings about in him. By such symmetry, such internal self-consistency of theme does Molière raise comedy to the dignity of tragedy. No longer is our laughter caused by accident, confusion or misapprehension: it is given human significance because it is directed at a human failing (a comic rather than a tragic flaw) on which, by

a triumph of artistic purity, Molière makes plot, theme, and comic effect depend.

Thus we seek here to place a certain conception of human character at the centre of Molière's artistic inspiration. His Comic Hero is the man obsessed by his own view of the world and seeking to dominate others in the service of this view. Insofar as he becomes blind to all other points of view, he is comic, for there is a divergence between reality and his understanding of it. Insofar as he is always defeated in the end (and often is the direct cause of his own defeat), our laughter has a moral significance. Essentially, Molière takes a single vice expressed in different forms (avarice, hypochondria, misanthropy), shows that its effects are bad, and then causes it to be checked. To this extent, therefore, we claim that Molière's comedies have a moral theme (though we have no intention of claiming that Molière himself wished to moralise or to improve human behaviour). In this way we seek to harmonise the three apparently separate themes of character, morality, and the comic in Molière. Keeping in mind these three themes, we will draw a composite portrait of the Molièresque Comic Hero under the headings of Background and Character. The first of these chapters will treat the similarities of social background which the Comic Heroes display (for example, they are generally of bourgeois origin); the second will discuss typical character traits, in an attempt to show why the Comic Hero is comic; and in our Conclusion we will seek to draw together the themes of morality and the comic into the all-important concept of comedy of character.

However, the conception of character given above is in fact the culmination of our study. We attempt first of all to build up a picture of the Comic Hero in his relations with the other groups of characters in the play, and only at the end do we synthesise these elements into a whole. The justification of this method is that since the Comic Hero is at the very centre of the play, the other groups are important chiefly insofar as they reveal different aspects of his nature. Since each group gives us a different impression of him, it appears that Molière's dramatic technique consists in the progressive revelation of aspects of a single central character. This interpretation would certainly go some way to explain his apparent contempt for plot and dénouement.

For the purposes of this study, the secondary characters in our chosen plays have been divided into five groups. These groups are: Servants, Wives, Young People, Raisonneurs, and Parasites or Caricatures. We may now proceed to some general observations about them.

The Groups of Secondary Characters

Every one of our five groups has a fairly well-defined and differentiated function in the overall purpose of revealing the Comic Hero's nature. These functions overlap slightly, since Molière's works are dramatic creations dealing with human beings and not moral treatises. Nonetheless, it is clear that each of the groups contributes a different element to the picture of the comic hero; by examining each element carefully in turn, we will end with a composite picture of the central character. The dramatic movement of the plays we will treat tends, as we have already said, towards the revelation of the comic hero. The other groups will thus be examined

primarily insofar as they contribute to this revelation; we will mention their individual characteristics only in the degree to which they help us to understand the central character. Our chapter headings will stress this revelatory function: The Servants: The Comic Hero in Plot and Personality; The Wives: The Comic Hero's Background; The Young People: The Comic Hero in Action; The Raisonneurs: The Comic Hero as Philosopher; The Parasites or Caricatures: The Blindness of the Comic Hero. Each group, it will be seen, reveals a different aspect of the hero's nature because it clashes with him in a different way from the others.

Thus our schematisation has considerable value in the separation and definition of dramatic functions. It also has a certain disadvantage, which should be mentioned here: it tends to reduce all our plays to the same general scheme, that of the bourgeois household headed by an aging despot.[3] Argan in the Malade Imaginaire would be a typical example. Taking the role of the Comic Hero himself, he has a raisonneur (Béralde) to offer him advice; a daughter (Angélique) whom he will not permit to marry as she wishes; a servant (Toinette) who speaks frankly to him, and the various parasites in the guise of doctors who make a living out of him. He lacks only one element, a devoted wife, for his own wife, Béline, is an unfeeling schemer.

This typical plan, however, is somewhat unsuited to three plays: L'Étourdi, Dom Juan, and Le Misanthrope. In the first, it is Mascarille who

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[3]For a full list of the plays treated in the dissertation, see p. 10 below.

dominates rather than any of the older men, though this may be explained by the fact that L'Étourdi is an early work written under the influence of the commedia dell'arte. With Dom Juan the case is different again. The hero is certainly no bourgeois paterfamilias, and oppresses no young people. He does of course have a servant, Sganarelle, who reminds us in his franker moments of both servants and raisonneurs in other Molière plays (though perhaps more subject to his master's authority than these other individuals). In this play, therefore, we will lay more stress on the central character, who bears undoubted resemblances to the other characters treated here, than on the groups, which are more disparate (more confused, perhaps) than those in the other plays.

Le Misanthrope also departs from our scheme. Alceste has no wife or family, though Célimène's criticisms of him are not unlike those which a Mme Jourdain might make. There is no plain-speaking servant, but there is perhaps the best-known and most sententious of all raisonneurs, Philinte. Here again, therefore, we will stress the fraternal resemblance between Alceste and the heroes of other plays rather than the overall similarities of the plays themselves.

The three plays cited above are the most notable exceptions to our scheme. It must in honesty be added that every work treated here presents minor exceptions. As we noted above, Argan lacks a typical wife. We might add M. Jourdain, who has no raisonneur to advise him; or Arnolphe and Sganarelle, neither of whom has a typical servant. However, we have no desire to make a Procrustean bed out of a general scheme. Local variations from an overall plan do not necessarily prove it to be erroneous. In fact, they

demonstrate the variety of Molière's work, showing that although he may have repeatedly presented the same intuitional view of the world, yet it was never in the same dramatic form. True to himself as a thinker, he scarcely altered his view of the world once it was formed; but being an artist as well, he used a constantly varying dramatic and creative form.

As a final exercise, we will take the dramatis personae of two plays and show how they can be divided into the six groups (including the hero) outlined above. This will make it clear that our schematisation gives a fairly precise general account of the works and that the exceptions to it are comparatively minor.

To begin with L'École des Femmes. Here, Arnolphe is the comic hero. Agnès and Horace are the young people, Alain and Georgette appear as caricatures, and Chrysalde as the raisonneur. This leaves only Enrique ("beau-frère d'Arnolphe") and Oronte ("père d'Horace") whom we cannot classify by our scheme, but who are in any case very minor characters scarcely calling for discussion.

In the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, M. Jourdain is the comic hero, Mme Jourdain the wife. Cléante and Lucille are young people, Nicole and Covielle are servants. The four maîtres and their two élèves are parasites, as is also Dorante. This leaves us only with two laquais, who are unimportant, and Dorimène. The latter is more difficult to classify. She is not really a Parasite,[4] since she is unaware of the original source of Dorante's gifts to her (i.e. M. Jourdain). Nor can she be described as a Caricature, since she is an intelligent, even sensitive woman. We are thus constrained to omit her from our discussion of the play; since her role is not essential, the omission is perhaps not unpardonable.

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[4]Though she accepts gifts originating from Jourdain, and visits his house, she is no more than the involuntary accomplice of Dorante. Dorimène does not know that Jourdain is the source of the money which Dorante spends on her.

It should by now be clear that our schematisation into five groups and a comic hero is a justifiable one, despite the exceptions inevitable when one is dealing with a series of diverse artistic creations.

The Selection of the Plays to be Examined

Having stated our method and the objects of our examination, we must now discuss the choice of plays to be used in these pages. We have mentioned the idea of a dominating central character as fundamental to our thesis. Such a character is by no means to be found in every Molière play; indeed, of the 33 plays of the canon[5] we find only 8 in which such a character appears. To these eight we have added one (L'Étourdi) in which the germs of later development may be discerned. Our list of nine plays, with the chief character in each, is the following: L'Étourdi (Trufaldin, Pandolfe, Anselme); L'École des Maris (Sganarelle); L'École des Femmes (Arnolphe); Le Misanthrope (Alceste); Tartuffe (Orgon); Dom Juan (Don Juan); L'Avare (Harpagon); Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme (M. Jourdain); and Le Malade Imaginaire (Argan).

It will be seen that this list contains most of Molière's generally familiar works and individual characters. Now our original criterion for selection - the existence of a dominating central individual - is a purely technical one. We have no desire at the outset to "rank" the plays on a hierarchical basis which would for example place the grandes comédies above the farces. This is the mistake made by Boileau in his condemnation of Scapin and his "sac ridicule" as unworthy of the author of the Misanthrope. Molière's work is the product of a diverse genius, and only critical myopia could lead to the imposition of a rigid hierarchy on his works in the manner of

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[5] Including Psyche and the two early farces.

the nineteenth century academic critics. We should not think of him as being a philosopher before he was a dramatist.[6]

Since Lanson,[7] however, critics have generally avoided any such attempt to rank the plays according to a hypothetical order of merit. The most authoritative of modern critics, Moore and Bray,[8] neglect the study of Molière's ideas in order to present him as a practising dramatist, a creator of theatrical forms. Bray goes so far as to claim this: "le comique ne peut comporter ni moralité ni immoralité." (p. 295). This is an extreme position, of course, as extreme in its own way as that of Bossuet.[9] While it helps us to avoid a one-sided view of Molière as a philosopher, it leads us just as far

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[6]cf. Émile Faguet, "Molière," Dix-Septième Siècle: Études Littéraires (Paris: Boivin, n.d.);
Ferdinand Brunetière, "Molière," Histoire de la Littérature française classique (Paris: Delagrave, 1912). Tome II: "Le XVII^{e} Siècle." Both these authors take a rather rigid view of Molière as a moral philosopher even before he is a dramatist.

[7]Gustave Lanson, "Molière et la Farce," Revue de Paris, 1 mai 1901, pp. 129-153.

[8]Will G. Moore, Molière (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949); René Bray, Molière homme de théâtre (Paris: Mercure de France, 1954). To cite two other examples: H.C. Lancaster, the great historian of 17th century theatre, observes: "Molière was a comic dramatist, not a philosopher or a propagandist." History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1929-1942). Part III, vol. 1, p. 220.
J. D. Hubert (Molière and the Comedy of Intellect, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962) uses a different approach, that of structualist criticism, but reaches the same conclusion: that Molière is primarily a creator of dramatic forms.

[9]The Bishop of Meaux refers to Molière's work thus: "Les discours où ce rigoureux censeur des grands canons, ce grave réformateur des mines et des expression de nos precieuses, étale cependant au plus grand jour les avantages d'une infâme tolérance dans les maris, et sollicite les femmes à de honteuses vengeances contre leurs jaloux." (Maximes et Réflexions sur la Comédie)

in another direction, that of regarding him simply as a comic writer without any roots in reality. This no doubt is what Antoine Adam is thinking of when he criticises modern commentators for seeking in Molière "une sorte de comique à l'état pur, la plus vaine, la plus chimérique des idoles."[10]

Exaggeration in these matters is dangerous. We will therefore choose a middle road, picturing Molière neither as a moralist nor as a dramatist pure and simple, but as a mixture of both. In these circumstances, we are justified in selecting those of his works which contain both comic elements and a moral theme. Indeed, we will venture to say that because of their complexity such works reward study more than those which are only comic (such as the farces) or overly sententious (such as Les Femmes Savantes). In our nine plays, we get the best of Molière, for it is here that we see his comic genius in combination with his profounder human themes. Despite the preference of Louis XIV's court for farces or comédies-ballets, despite the modern tendency to minimise Molière's ideas in comparison with his technique,[11] we feel that our nine plays show more of Molière and contain more of value for the reader than any other group of plays in the canon.

A word should be said here on the addition of L'Étourdi to our list.

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[10] Histoire de la Littérature française au XVII^{e} Siècle (Paris: Editions Mondiales, 1962), III, 403.

[11] While appreciating the new insights offered by Moore and Bray, we are more influenced by the freedom of approach shown by practising men of the theatre such as Louis Jouvet ("Molière," Conferencia, XVIII, 1 septembre 1937) or Jacques Audiberti (Molière, Paris: L'Arche, 1954). Regarding Molière as pure theatre, these men simply sweep away the doctrinaire attitude, without substituting one of their own; Audiberti observes (p. 54):"[Molière] est en dehors de la littérature."

To return to the principal feature of our plays: they contain a central character who has an obsession which he seeks to impose on others and which blinds him to the realities of his situation. This is true of every play except L'Étourdi, chronologically the first work discussed here. The chief character of this play, written while Molière was still strongly influenced by commedia dell'arte tradition,[12] is undoubtedly Mascarille, "fourbum imperator." Such a personality has little in common with Harpagon or Argan. Significance here is sought rather in the three figures of old men which the play contains: Anselme, Trufaldin, and Pandolfe. These three characters, we suggest, contain the seeds of the great figures developed later by Molière. They are in the traditional comic-plot situation of conflict with young people who wish to be married; they exercise financial or moral restraint upon the young in an attempt to dominate them; they are tricked and eventually defeated by the young and their allies. In character, they have various embryonic traits which are developed in later individuals; old men, they are avaricious, egocentric, illiberal, and eventually blinded by their own selfishness. For these reasons, L'Étourdi has been considered sufficiently interesting for inclusion in this thesis. It shows that even at the beginning Molière had in mind certain themes which were to be more richly developed later.

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[12]For the influence of the commedia dell'arte on Molière, see Gustave Attinger, L'Esprit de la commedia dell'arte dans le théatre français (Paris: Libraire Théâtrale, 1950); Isidore A. Schwartz, The Commedia dell'arte and its Influence on French Comedy in the 17th Century (New York: Institute of French Studies, n.d.).

Both these authors extend the idea of the mask (i.e. of fixity) into Molière's great characters. While quite possible, this theory is of little relevance to us here; however, it is clear that Mascarille is a product of this tradition.

Plays Omitted from the List

Several of Molière's more familiar works are omitted from our list. We will now discuss them individually so that the reasons for this omission may become more clear.

Les Précieuses Ridicules is the play which first put Molière's name before the audiences of Paris and the court. This play is normally considered a comédie de moeurs and seems to be intended principally as satire on a particular fashion or at least the interpretation of it by two "pecques provinciales." The play cannot be qualified as comedy of character; its central personality, Mascarille, interests us by what he does rather than by what he is in himself.

Several minor masterpieces of what may be called the "Sganarelle type" are also omitted. Such are Sganarelle, Le Médecin Malgré Lui, and Les Fourberies de Scapin. These again will not qualify as comedies of character in the normal sense. They do of course depict various incarnations of Sganarelle himself, one of Molière's great comic creations,[13] but the comedy in them is of a slapstick and farcical nature. Furthermore, Sganarelle dominates these plays chiefly by actual physical presence, and secondly by being more comical than anyone else. He is a cocky, vulgar,

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[13] cf. the opinion of Maurice Donnay: "Certaines personnes, non sans goût, préfèrent, dans l'oeuvre de Molière, des petites comédies, comme le Mariage Forcé, l'Amour Médecin, le Médecin Malgré Lui, aux grandes comédies. Cela peut se défendre." (Molière, Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1911).

We approve of Donnay's attitude, while finding these works less complex than the ones we have selected for examination.

but vulnerable coq de village (cf. his misfortunes in the Médecin Malgré Lui), very different from the obsessive, fanatical Harpagon or his domineering namesake (Sganarelle) in the École des Maris. So these plays as well as their principal character differ essentially from those treated here.

We are left with two plays, Amphitryon and Les Femmes Savantes, well-known certainly, but whose claim to the title of masterpiece is variously upheld and disputed. They are not normally ranked with the finest plays, and both lack a dominating central personality. Amphitryon does not contain the rich comedy so plentiful in other plays of Molière. It appealed to a late 17th century audience, perhaps, in its treatment of the theme of divinity (with reference to Louis XIV), and its undertones of seduction and immorality. The situation is more dramatic than comic, and the chief character, Sosie, in no sense predominates over the others.[14]

The Femmes Savantes is generally admitted to be poor in the comic[15]; the common explanation of this failure is that Molière was trying too hard in his attempt to write a grande comédie. The play is more a comedy of manners than of character, since the vice which it satirises - feminine pedantry - was more common in the France of the 1670's than it has been in other ages and countries. The theme therefore has a more limited appeal

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[14]Robert Jouanny, in his Notice to the play (Molière: Oeuvres Complètes, ed. R. Jouanny, Paris: Garnier, 1961, (II, III - 114), stresses the appeal to the court of "un écho scandaleux des galanteries du prince."
Antoine Adam observes (Histoire..., p. 366): "cette oeuvre ... n'est pas absolument un chef-d'oeuvre."

[15]René Benjamin observes "cette comédie ... ennuie". (Molière, Paris: Plon, 1936), p. 212.
Antoine Adam (Histoire, p. 394) calls it "cette comédie manquée." Even Gustave Reynier in a laudatory study (Les Femmes Savantes de Molière, Paris: Mellottée, n.d.), finds nothing to say specifically about the comic in the play.

than a universally valid one such as avarice or misanthropy. As a result, the comic effects are less satisfying, and there is no personality who dominates the play like the ones whom we treat in these pages. Chrysale, the chief male character, is too submissive to his wife's authority, while Philaminte herself does not dominate the plot and is not fundamentally affected by the vice of pedantry. It is not in her case the result of an inner compulsion which must express itself somehow; it is simply a fad, a fashion whose shortcomings she realises at the end of the play. Thus, though obsessive and authoritarian, she is much less so than an Alceste or an Argan, and does not rank with them in the quality of the comedy she occasions or the profundity of her nature.

The other plays omitted here are minor works whose inclusion in a limited topic is unnecessary. One must be familiar with the Sicilien, the Impromptu de Versailles, or George Dandin in order to appreciate the full range of Molière's work, but the great works are no doubt more worthy of study and more likely to reveal - at white heat - the essence of Molière's thought.

We are left therefore with nine plays and a series of dominating characters. In effect, each of these works presents the same basic situation; we may thus presume that this situation, and the themes to which it gives rise, are basic to Molière's art. Through all its variations, it remains essentially the same, and provides an unvarying source of inspiration for Molière's moral attitude and his comic art.

Limitations of the Study

This study deals with a total of nine plays, among which are the majority of Molière's best-known and most highly-regarded works. Thus the

conclusions which we draw provide insights valid for perhaps the most significant part of Molière's production. In all honesty, we feel that the present approach provides greater help than any other unified, simple (rather than multiple) interpretation of our chosen works. This does not mean however that we claim to offer an all-inclusive or a final view of him. Our selection of plays leans heavily on the grandes comédies, tending to exclude the other aspects of Molière's creation. This in itself is unfair to a man who composed farces, comédies-ballets, comédies critiques, comédies de moeurs, and a comédie héroique as well. Again, we neglect here the richness of Molière's stage presentation, his use of music, dancing, costume and scenery to engage the audience's attention. Molière himself would certainly have been wary of an interpretation which totally neglected the scenic aspect of his work in order to concentrate on the mere written text.

But what interpretation would be valid for a series of over 30 works of the greatest diversity, ranging from the medieval farce and the commedia dell'arte to the pièce à grand spectacle and the beginnings of opera? Surely no externally imposed point of view could be adequate; one must return to the man himself. The combination of genius and the need to please an audience lies at the origin of Molière's diversity. He wrote the plays, after all, so the simplest explanation is in the end perhaps the most satisfying.

We are therefore conscious of the limits of our study in face of the entirety of Molière's work. Yet a thing may be done well within a small compass, so we trust that the recognition of our weakness may give greater value to whatever strength we possess.

Chapter II. The Specific Structure of Molière's Comédie de Caractère.

Comédie de Caractère.

As is stated in the preceding chapter, our interpretation of the comic in Molière hinges on the notion of certain central characters. To return for a moment to the traditional phraseology, we conceive of his plays as comédies de caractère. The two other traditional classifications, comédie de moeurs and comédie de situation, may also be found among Molière's works.[1] Neither of these however offers the same opportunities for artistic integrity and profundity as a situation in which plot and comic effect arise from the very nature of the persons involved. In terms of the three unities of classical tragedy, unity of action can be found only in comédie de caractère, where accident, misapprehension, and the peculiarities of fashion play only minor roles.

We do not wish to suggest that Molière was always interested primarily in the depiction of character. Such a claim could not be made of for example Les Fâcheux or L'Amour Médecin. Nevertheless, in the nine plays selected here, artistic cohesion seems to be furnished only by the idea of progressive revelation of character. Thus one of the strongest critical points traditionally made against Molière is the weakness of his dénouements.[2] What,

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[1] Thus Les Précieuses Ridicules is an example of the first, and Le Cocu Imaginaire of the second. We may note that two of the works discussed here, L'Étourdi and Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, cannot be regarded as pure comédie de caractère. We prefer to envisage them from this angle, however, in order to show the resemblance between them and our other works. L'Étourdi contains three individuals (Trufaldin, Pandolfe, and Anselme) who prefigure the Comic Heroes of later plays; M. Jourdain of the Bourgeois is in many respects a typical Comic Hero himself.

[2] cf. the opinion of J.J. Weiss: "S'arrêter à combiner des faits qui constituent une intrigue? Il n'en a pas le temps, il ne s'en donne pas le souci. Que lui importe en effet, puisqu'il a l'art de faire une pièce avec un seul caractère." (Molière, Paris: Calmann Levy, 1900), p.35.

for example, is the plot of Dom Juan? It seems to be little more than a series of sketches strung together by the presence of the hero. What of the traditional situation repeated in so many plays, that of a pair of lovers thwarted but eventually successful in their desire to be married? The dénouement of Tartuffe is a celebrated example of the deus ex machina[3]; the apotheosis of M. Jourdain in the Bourgeois Gentilhomme or of Argan in the Malade Imaginaire, like the inevitable marriages, are, as Jouvet said, "de la plus parfaite et de la plus pure tradition théâtrale,"[4] but certainly lack verisimilitude.

Such criticism however contains an answer within itself. If Molière pays no attention to novelty of plot or verisimilitude of dénouement, it is more than likely that he has no interest in such things. When, as in the nine plays studied here, character depiction is his central purpose, then the plot need consist of no more than a series of sketches intended to reveal different sides of the character under examination. Since a plot of this kind has no mechanical unity, there is no need to give it a mechanically satisfying end of the kind that a "well-made" play would require. A theatrical convention such as marriage will be sufficient; or alternatively, the central character can be shown unrepentant and happy in the fulfilment of his desires

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[3]Jacques Scherer (Structures de Tartuffe, Paris: SEDES 1966) attempts to justify the dénouement by internal reasons drawn from the play, but he notes that Lancaster, Guicharnaud, and Adam regard it as artificial. Daniel Mornet (Molière, Paris: Hatier, 1962) calls it "tout à fait arbitraire" (p. 126)

[4]Conferencia, XVIII, 294.

(as are Jourdain and Argan, or Harpagon on the recovery of his cassette). An "open" ending of this kind is of course at the farthest remove from the conventions of the theatre, since it is essentially what happens in real life. It suggests that the character will live on and that therefore the action of the play may be infinitely prolonged. In real life personalities do not change much, so that when Molière shows his characters as egocentric to the very end, he is in fact practising the utmost verisimilitude. Thus the charades which terminate the Bourgeois Gentilhomme or the Malade Imaginaire are in fact much more than mere "play-acting": as the wish-fulfilment of the comic hero, they represent the profoundest reality. All the plays treated here, except for Tartuffe, end either with a marriage or with a final vignette of the unrepentant comic hero; several end with a combination of both. In other words, Molière goes from pure theatrical convention to utter reality, and in both cases neglects to provide the neat ending which a well-made plot requires.

If the present interpretation is considered merely as a restatement of the theme of comedy of character in Molière, it offers little novelty. The number of critics, past and present, who have pursued this line, is legion. We may cite certain opinions chosen at random, simply in order to show that many other writers have felt the idea of character to lie at the heart of Molière's inspiration. Eugène Rigal writes that in Molière: "L'essentiel, c'est la peinture des moeurs et des caractères."[5] Brunetière sees Molière's dramatic system as "subordination des situations aux caractères."[6]

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[5] Molière, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1908), II, 318.

[6] Histoire, II, 414

Faguet writes; "Il a voulu atteindre le naturel, atteindre la ressemblance avec la vie en luttant de complexité avec elle dans la peinture des caractères."[7] Sainte-Beuve: "Molière est peintre de la nature humaine au fond."[8] More recently, Félix Gaiffe: "Notre grand comique est visiblement attiré surtout par l'étude des caractères."[9] Finally, the greater part of Lionel Gossman's book[10] is taken up with a study of the comic hero in five plays.

The idea of comedy of character is therefore of long and honourable standing in Molière criticism. We can claim no originality here (except, of course, in our method of procedure); we seek rather to support our central contention by some reference to the many critics who have seen this as the essence of Molière's achievement.

The Moral Attitude

In this matter, one may easily find quotations from critics to support any point of view. The 17th century tended to see Molière in fairly simple terms of black or white. One need think only of Bossuet's ferocious attack,[11] or the interminable battles which followed many of Molière's best plays: Les Précieuses Ridicules, L'École des Femmes (with its polemical pendant, La

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[7] XVII[e] Siècle, pp. 273-274.

[8] "Molière," in "Portraits Litteraires," Oeuvres (Pléiade, 1960), p. 16.

[9] Le Rire et la Scène francaise (Paris: Boivin, 1931), p. 115.

[10] Men and Masks.

[11] cf. p.11 above

Critique de l'École des Femmes), Dom Juan, and Tartuffe, which was condemned by the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement before its first presentation.[12] The 18th century, as Antoine Adam observes,[13] interpreted him in terms of délicatesse, bienséance, and distinction; in other words, according to its own lights. This tendency to refashion him in one's own image is especially evident in Fabre d'Églantine's interpretation of Alceste as a forerunner of the French Revolution. The 19th century, in which academic criticism came to the fore, returned to a serious moral viewpoint, ranking the plays in a hierarchy according to their supposed profundity of theme. Somewhat less severe than Molière's contemporaries, the 19th century saw him not exclusively in terms of good or evil, but rather as the champion of some philosophical attitude, whether it be reason, nature, epicureanism, Gassendisme, or even the bourgeois point of view. In our own century, the pendulum has swung to the very opposite extreme. Critics such as Moore and Bray, theatrical practitioners such as Jouvet, Audiberti and Jacques Arnavon,[14] all present Molière primarily as a creator of theatrical forms.

Such is the spectrum of critical viewpoints. Our own attitude is somewhat eclectic. Firstly, we maintain that there is a moral attitude to be found in the plays examined here. Whether Molière is seeking to improve our behaviour by adopting such an attitude ("Castigat Ridendo Mores") is a question

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[12] cf. Lancaster, History ... Pt. III, Vol. II, p. 631.

[13] Histoire, III, 403.

[14] e.g. in L'École des Femmes de Molière (Paris: Plon, n.d.)

we shall not attempt to answer. It is very difficult to know what his intentions were; consequently, there seems little point in arguing about them. Nevertheless, even if we disregard Molière's intentions, we may yet claim, without any desire to be disingenuous, that there is a moral attitude at the heart of his comedy. As we have stated above, we believe that Molière's comedies warn us against egocentricity, against the attempt to impose our will upon other people in the service of some mania of our own. Molière's comic heroes, who try to do this, render themselves ridiculous in the attempt, and always end in defeat[15]. Within the limits of artistic integrity, Molière could not make his attitude clearer.

It should be added that we have no wish to state this morality in terms of reason and unreason, or the natural and the unnatural. Such terminology would necessitate impossibly long digressions into the idea which the 17th century in general, and the libertins in particular, held of these words. We prefer to interpret Molière according to internal criteria taken from the works themselves rather than according to concepts developed by other writers or in later periods. Our conclusions will therefore stand on their own terms; this, we feel, will at least be in the interests of clarity.

Our view of Molière's moral attitude is thus rather different from views presented previously. In the modern period, however, three critics have suggested not dissimilar interpretations. We will briefly discuss their ideas.

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[15] cf. the opinion of Georges Bordonove: "Chez Molière, la fatalité s'appelle l'incommensurable sottise des hommes." Molière génial et familier (Paris: Laffont, 1967), p. 491.

Lionel Gossman develops the broad theme that 17th century comedy portrays "the indifference of the world"[16] towards the individual. This feeling he extends into the works of Molière, whose chief characters (e.g. Orgon, Alceste, Don Juan) he sees as great egotists, monstrous in their vanity. The dichotomy within them, the reason why they are comic, arises because they seek constant adulation from others, and yet wish this adulation to be freely given. Thus "Orgon's real desire is, like Don Juan's or Alceste's, to have himself recognised by all around him as divinely absolute and self-sufficient." (p.102) While agreeing with Gossman as to the egotistical nature of these individuals, we do not concur in his view of them as anxiously seeking the approval of others. Indeed, we see the Comic Hero as deliberately ignoring the individuality of other people and using them as elements in his own reconstruction of the world.

A.J. Krailsheimer traces the theme of the "moi désaxé" in the 17th century.[17] He suggests that authors were constrained to offer new conceptions of the ego or human personality in this era; Molière's approach is revealed in the theme of his plays which Krailsheimer states succinctly as monomania. Orgon, Don Juan, and Alceste are "clinical cases of persons otherwise normal afflicted by monomania." (p. 172.) The action of many of the plays springs from the clash between an individual ego and the rest of society over an "irrevocable" action such as marriage. Thus the plot of L'École des Femmes is based on "a refusal to

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[16] Men and Masks, p. 206.

[17] Studies in Self-Interest.

allow one aberrant ego to dominate any other". (p. 157) While agreeing with Krailsheimer's basic idea of monomania, we apply it to a larger selection of characters, and extend it to embrace the theory of the comic, which this author neglects.

Marcel Gutwirth is closest to us in his selection of comic heroes.[18] Treating Molière from the point of view of transposition of traditional themes, he sees these characters as embodying the three types of "le Père," "l'Époux," and "le Vieillard." Molière humanises the traditional conception of the Old Man, he suggests, by combining it with the other two roles of husband and father. Gutwirth also discusses the theme of the comic hero's opposition to the marriage of the young people, which is a significant point in our own analysis. However, he differs from us in two essential points. Firstly, he does not place the character of the comic hero at the centre of his view of Molière. For him, the dramatist's work is best symbolised by a character such as Toinette, whom he describes thus: "Joyeuse, loyale, désintéressée, lucide mais avec allégresse et même espièglerie, [elle] résume tout ce que nous devons à ce grand homme qui, pour nous éclairer sur nous-mêmes, a choisi la voie la plus charitable, celle de la gaieté." (p. 209) Secondly, his view of the comic in Molière tends to deny any moral theme: "L'incongruité dont on rit est la victoire du moindre et du pire sur le meilleur et le majeur." (p.9) Thus we laugh at Harpagon's "sans dot" or Orgon's "le pauvre homme" because

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[18] In his book Molière ou l'invention comique (Paris: Minard, 1966) he treats Arnolphe, Orgon, Don Juan, Alceste, Harpagon, Jourdain and Argan.

they show a topsy-turvy world in which the unworthy may harmlessly rule for a few hours. Our own interpretation of the words of Harpagon and Orgon is that we laugh because we are conscious of the closed mentality of these individuals: the contrast between reality and their limited impression of it is what makes us laugh. Thus we suggest a moral approach which Gutwirth does not offer.

We may now proceed to a discussion of our last major theme: the comic in the work of Molière.

The Comic in Molière

Since Molière is after all an author of comedies, any interpretation of his work should tend towards a redefinition of his use of the comic. This is primarily what we are seeking to provide here: our central conception of the Comic Hero brings together the two threads of morality and the comic. We suggest that the comic hero is self-centred to the exclusion of all else; that the resulting blindness brings about his defeat; finally, that he is comic chiefly because of the divergence between the reality surrounding him and the view which he takes of it. Here we have the principal source of comic effects in Molière. It is shown constantly in the relationship between the comic hero and the other groups of characters. Thus the Servants play on the comic hero's blindness either by making him appear ridiculous (as the women do) or by instigating plots against him (the province of the men); the Wives remind us of the comic hero's background and by this contrast indicate the extent of his aberrations; the Young People, being subject to his will in the matter of marriage, demonstrate the strength of his desire to impose on others; the Raisonneurs draw him out into statements which reveal the one-sidedness of his philosophy; and the Parasites simply profit by his blindness to live off

The two great modern theorists, Freud and Bergson, attempt in different ways to combine the intellectual and moral approaches. Freud's theory is that laughter is caused by a comparison between two contrasting perceptions, the first of which causes psychic tension, while the second reveals this tension to be unnecessary. The psychic energy built up by the first perception dissipates itself in the nervous reaction of laughter. Freud suggests however that the original tension is caused when we observe infantile traits in the behaviour of adults; this stricture gives his ideas greater significance in psychotherapy, no doubt, but lessens their value in the discussion of art.[20]

Bergson is the theorist who has the greatest relevance for our present purpose. His theory of rigidity is the most cogent ever applied to Molière; we will return to it in our final remarks.

Of these two theoretical lines, we favour here the first: that of incongruity between two objects. We incorporate this into our notion that laughter is caused by the incongruity between the Comic Hero's view of the world and the reality of it. As for the moral theme, we are reluctant to admit that the average spectator laughs at, say, Harpagon, because he believes himself superior to the miser. Are we so constantly and immediately aware of this superiority that it can burst forth spontaneously in laughter?

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[20]Mauron (op. cit.) pursues Freud's theory of infantilism in examining the comic in the theatre. This, he finds, consists in "le renversement des situations angoissantes." (p. 30) As an example "la fantaisie de triomphe sur le père, dans l'oeuvre de Plaute, devient, dans celle de Molière, une fantaisie de cocuage." (p. 133)

The first principles of this approach are so completely different from ours that we will not try to take it into account here.

It seems unlikely. Thus we do not see this feeling of superiority as a universal characteristic of the comic. However, in the case of Molière, we feel that laughter does have a moral purpose, for it is directed by the author at a moral failing in his comic heroes. We laugh at the comic hero's mistakes firstly because they arise from his erroneous view of the world - this is a purely physical matter of contrast; but we also laugh with joy at his defeat because he is egocentric and selfish.[21] We suggest here that the moral gap is not so much between our superiority and the comic hero's inferiority as between the comic hero as he really should be and the comic hero as he has forced himself to become. This is perhaps why Molière so often reminds us of the hero's background, his better nature, and the affection which his family still has for him.

Having outlined above our relationship to the broad lines of thought on the comic, we shall now proceed to show how the general nature of our

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[21]Since we do not lean heavily on the idea of joy or euphoria in our approach to the comic in Molière, we will not discuss it at length. However, several other writers have gone so far as to place it at the very centre of their conception of the comic in his works. Such are R. Jasinski (Molière et le Misanthrope, Paris: Nizet, 1963), who sees two kinds of humour in Molière: "le rire de simple bonne humeur" and "le comique de satire" (p. 293); Percy Chapman in The Spirit of Molière (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), for whom the comic emotion is "a matter of...joy" (p. 230); Daniel Mornet in Molière (Paris: Hatier, 1962) speaks of his "gaieté large" (p. 139); Jacques Arnavon in L'École des Femmes de Molière (Paris: Plon, n.d.), who observes "les rires fusent en joyeuses salves"; even Bray (Molière, homme de théâtre), who speaks of "la communion d'allégresse qui fonde le rire" (p. 286). While admitting this as an element in the appreciation of Molière, we attempt here to be much more specific as to the nature of the comic.

interpretation differs from the views of those who discuss Molière principally or specifically. Most authors display a tendency to treat a limited area or to offer a one-sided view of him. We have mentioned above those who tend towards the idea of "euphorie"; equally limited, in spite of his elegance of expression, is George Meredith.[22] He stresses the intellectual subtlety of Molière in reproving those who stray from the path of "reason, common-sense, righteousness, and justice"; he pictures the comic spirit as correcting us by "volleys of silvery laughter" (p. 47). While agreeing that there is a moral attitude in Molière, we feel that Meredith's approach is too intellectual to take into account the richness of the comic in these works.

Georges Poulet[23] offers a theory equally limited in our view, since it is overly technical. He thinks of the comic, in line with his general discussion of time, as a break in the continuity of existence: "Le ridicule est donc la perception immédiate d'une perturbation soudaine dans l'ordre de la durée humaine" (p. 119). He pursues the psychological ramifications of this, but without adding the dimensions of character and morality which our own theory includes.

Danilo Romano, while thorough in his survey of other theories, has difficulty in formulating his own. This seems to be primarily of a technical nature, for he sees the comic as arising from the difference between two

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[22] Essay on the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit Page reference is to the Works (New York: Scribner, 1960), vol. 23.

[23] Études sur le Temps humain (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1949).

planes, between observer and object, for example, or between aspiration and reality (as in the comic hero, who suffers from a "scission intérieure").

We may conclude that writers on the comic in Molière tend to adopt a limited approach. This cannot however be said of the last author we must cite, Henri Bergson.

Bergson's work Le Rire[24] is in our opinion the most cogent treatment of this topic that exists. Since it leans heavily on the theatre of Molière for its examples, we may justifiably consider it as a theory of the comic in Molière. The general outlines of this system are well known: the essence of comedy is defined in a celebrated phrase as "du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant"; comedy is exclusively human, it appeals to the intellect rather than to the emotions, and it exercises a social function in correcting the "raideur" which prevents individuals from functioning in the fluid social group. The chief specific cases of this rigidity are designated as "répétition," "inversion," and "interférence des séries," all of which may be found in profusion in Molière. The comic character must be unaware of the fact that he is comic, and his attitude is rooted ultimately in vanity, which both causes his rigidity and blinds him to it. There is a final fruitful comparison between comedy and tragedy: comedy seeks to correct general, widespread vices, and thus is a social art; therefore the heroes of comedy tend to have generic names (l'Avare, le Misanthrope); whereas tragedy tends to treat of individuals (Hamlet, Oedipus Rex).

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[24]The full title is "Essai sur le Rire et la signification du comique." It may be consulted in the Oeuvres (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), or in separate editions such as that by Presses Universitaires de France (Paris, 1958).

Because of their very profundity, Bergson's theories will enable us to give greater precision to our own. When taken as a whole, his ideas bear the stamp of incontrovertible authority, for they are based on a single and profound original insight. We may observe however that they are inspired at least as much by his general philosophy of life (i.e. something always changing, never uniform) as by consideration of the comic in itself. Furthermore, the general tendency of his system is to make the comic character appear somewhat mechanical and lifeless, rather like the diable à ressort or pantin à ficelles which he so aptly uses as illustrations. The present author prefers a different conception of Molière's comic characters: as men blinded by the influence of an overweening ego which dominates their own being and then seeks to extend its power over other people. Thus whereas Bergson starts out with the principle of rigidity, and then extends this into other areas, ending with the idea of the comic character, we begin with a conception of character, suggest why such a character is funny (egotism and the resulting blindness), and then inquire to what extent the comic of the work as a whole depends on this central conception. In a word, Bergson begins with a technique, whereas we begin with conception of character.[25] The result, we feel, is that our interpretation humanises Molière more than that of Bergson. Instead of seeing his characters as funny because they act like machines (in their rigidity), we see them as funny because they act like obsessed human beings. In pictorial terms, we see their psychology not as a straight line (rigidity), but as a closed circle (blindness).

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[25]Let it be admitted that whereas our interpretation may suit the plays chosen for examination here, it would be very difficult to extend it into every other area of the comic (e.g. wit and verbal humour), as Bergson so well does with his own theories.

To return to one of Bergson's own insights: we feel that the comic is human, and that the more we are aware of a character's humanity (the non-mechanical side of him), the funnier we will find his aberration. Bergson's argument would tend in the opposite direction: that the more we are aware of the mechanical side of a character (his rigidity), the more comic he is.

We differ from Bergson in one other major respect: our view of the moral theme in Molière. For him, laughter has a moral purpose: it seeks to bring the rigid individual back into society, from which he has excluded himself by his refusal to conform. For us, laughter (in our nine plays, at least), is two things: the expression of our perception of an inconsistency between reality and the comic character's view of it: and our joy at the defeat of one who seeks to tyrannise over others. The first reaction is intellectual, the second emotive. Thus for example we admit that Molière's comic heroes have a tendency to reject social life: Bergson would say that they are funny for this very reason. To us, the situation is more complex: Harpagon is opposed to society because he wishes to avoid expense; Sganarelle, because he is old-fashioned and wishes to keep Isabelle safe; Alceste, because he cannot impose his rules on others. All these separate idiosyncrasies form part of our original insight, since they are typical of the Comic Hero as we picture him; and so we may be as consistent as Bergson, while applying a different theory.

On each of these three major points (conception of a central character, role of morality, conception of the comic), we differ from Bergson. Nonetheless we owe him a debt, for in the contrast between his ideas and ours, we have been enabled to define our own with greater clarity. We may now proceed to trace these themes through our chosen works; we will begin by discussing the var-

ious groups and the light which they shed for us on the nature of the Comic Hero.

Chapter III: The Servants: The Comic Hero in Plot and Personality

Two general observations should be made before we begin our examination of the Servants. Firstly, we divide them into two groups, Male and Female, by reason of their different functions. The Menservants are chiefly important in the plot of the play because of the schemes which they invent to trick the Comic Hero; the Women tend to confront him on the level of personality rather than that of plot. Secondly, we shall constantly emphasize the role which the servants play in relation to the Comic Hero, rather than any significance which they may have in themselves. Any apparent inadequacy in our treatment, therefore, may be explained by the fact that our interest is directed always towards the Comic Hero as the central individual of the plays.

We will begin by discussing the Menservants.

Menservants

The characters to be treated under this heading are: Mascarille in L'Étourdi, Ergaste in L'École des Maris, Sganarelle in Dom Juan, Maître Jacques and La Flèche in L'Avare, and Covielle in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.

We will omit Ergaste in L'Étourdi, since he lacks any interesting characteristics, serving only to promote the plot. Basque in the Misanthrope and Brindavoine and La Merluche in L'Avare have small roles, appearing as laquais rather than personal servants. Du Bois in the Misanthrope has an amusing cameo role in which he appears confused and absent-minded (IV, iv), but this is not typical of any of the other roles with which we are concerned. We will mention Du Bois' fidelity, but the other characters will not be discussed.

Among those to be discussed, Mascarille and Sganarelle are major

characters, while the rest are minor. Their inclusion calls for some comment. Neither is in every respect a typical manservant of the type we shall delineate here. They are both too dominant in their roles, and display the complexities of character which their dramatic function requires. Thus Mascarille is by far the leading character in L'Étourdi. Like Figaro, he reduces all the others to insignificance by his side as his fertile brain discovers scheme after scheme. Sganarelle, as one of the two poles around which Dom Juan revolves, is clearly intended to contrast with the hero. He is extremely credulous and stupidly admiring towards his master, and his other feelings - cowardice and superstition, for example, are perhaps intended by Molière to discredit his religious beliefs. Having admitted that both these characters are too fully-drawn to fit our scheme perfectly, we may yet claim that in certain particulars they do resemble the portrait we wish to draw. This will be demonstrated below.

Molière's menservants are men of ordinary background (i.e. lower class) and material circumstances (they are simply servants presumably living off the wages given to them by their master).[1] They are rarely comic in themselves, and are used either in the plot or in some relationship to the comic hero. To a great degree, therefore, their function is to help in the revelation of the latter's character. They have certain well-defined

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[1] cf. Sganarelle's cry: "Mes gages! mes gages! mes gages!" (Dom Juan, V, vi).

characteristics; fidelity, intelligence sometimes combined with inventiveness, and common sense or the ability to perceive the realities of a situation. At this stage, we must divide them into two groups; those who serve the comic hero (Sganarelle and Maître Jacques), and those who serve the jeune premier (Mascarille, Ergaste, La Flèche, and Covielle). The former play little part in the plot, since they are devoted to the central character; the latter ally themselves with their young master. The crucial point is the identity of their master, and this determines their function in the play. Sganarelle and Maître Jacques react to the comic hero, cause reactions in him, and comment lugubriously on his behaviour; the others advance the plot and demonstrate the hero's blind egocentricity by the schemes they engineer.

We will now examine textually the points noted above.

Fidelity

In keeping with our general analysis, we will here examine the fidelity of the comic hero's servants, rather than the servants of the jeune premier. By this fidelity, the first group humanises the hero for us (by showing that not everybody has abandoned him in his egocentricity) and provides a comic contrast (between his behaviour and their surprised or mournful reaction to it.) Du Bois, for example, says to Alceste (and we have no reason to doubt him): "je vous sers avec beaucoup de zèle." (IV, iv) Maître Jacques has a touching affection for Harpagon, the most unlovable of men. He quarrels with Valère in the latter's capacity as Intendant of the household, because Valère indulges in gross and dishonest flattery of Harpagon. Jacques exclaims: "Monsieur, je ne saurais souffrir les flatteurs; et je vois que ce qu'il en fait n'est que pour vous gratter et pour vous faire sa cour."

(III, i) He cannot bear to hear how Harpagon is criticised by others, adding "après mes chevaux, vous êtes la personne que j'aime le plus." He even goes on to tell Harpagon what people say about him, though his only reward is (as he had expected) to be beaten.

Sganarelle is equally inseparable from his master Don Juan, despite his very ambivalent attitude towards the latter. His criticisms of Don Juan are sometimes quite open (e.g. V, iii), but Molière does not allow him the mental competence to make his point plainly. At other times (I,i) his criticism obviously embodies a sneaking admiration; in any case, he remains with the Don even through such situations as the supper with the Commandeur.

Character

These menservants are men of solid character. They possess common sense, often show kindness and understanding, and on several occasions are quicker or more inventive than their masters.

Sganarelle shows kindness in the pity which he feels for Elvire (IV, vi): he exclaims "Pauvre femme!" and apostrophises Don Juan as "Coeur de tigre!". He also warns the peasant girls about his master's character (II,iv): "Mon maître est un fourbe; il n'a dessein que de vous abuser, et en a bien abusé d'autres; c'est l'épouseur du genre humain...". Maître Jacques is quite humanitarian in his famous speech to Harpagon about the horses (III, i: "ce ne sont plus rien que des idées ou des fantômes, des façons de chevaux").

As for inventiveness and intelligence, a dozen examples may be quoted. Mascarille thinks up some ten schemes, and even disguises himself as a Swiss, complete with accent (V, iii). Ergaste in the École des Maris is a man of

experience who tells Valère how much easier it is to seduce the wife of a jealous husband (I, iv). He would be ready with strategems, no doubt, except that Sganarelle needs no help in engineering his own ruin. La Flèche in L'Avare shows a ready wit in his altercation with Harpagon (I,iii). He is apparently a former associate of the intriguing Frosine, and makes a vivacious speech to her describing Harpagon (II, v: "de tous les humains l'humain le moins humain"). Later, he has the wit to discover the hidden cassette of money (IV, vi), thus finally reducing Harpagon to helplessness. Even Maître Jacques displays some ability in temporarily stopping a quarrel between Harpagon and Cleanté (IV, iv): acting as a go-between, he simply alters what each of them says to pacify the other. Covielle is the presiding genius of the turquerie in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, and shows acting ability when he is purporting to be a friend of M. Jourdain's father (IV, iii). Indeed, he has a better understanding of Jourdain's character than his master, observing "il est homme...à donner aisément dans toutes les fariboles qu'on s'avisera de lui dire."

Even Sganarelle in Don Juan is no fool when the occasion calls upon him: thus he acts as a doctor for the peasants (III, i), and dismisses M. Dimanche rapidly when the conversation turns to his debts (IV, iii).

Revelatory and Comic Function

The above remarks should indicate the character of Molière's men-servants. They are not particularly comic in themselves[2], being by and large reasonable men; so to some extent, the simple juxtaposition of their character with that of the comic hero reveals the exaggerated personality of the latter. However, Molière increases their importance in this connection.

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[2]Though they certainly contribute to the comic atmosphere of these works, the menservants are not significant for comedy of character, which is our chief concern here. We laugh at the jeux de scène in which the servants are involved, the tricks which they play, or their manner of expression, for example. In the case of the Comic Hero, our amusement is caused by his character or psychology rather than simply by his actions.

Of the two groups (those who serve the comic hero and those who serve the young men), he causes the latter to be directly involved in the plot, and the former to comment humorously on their master's idiosyncrasies. The plot is directed towards the hero's downfall, and we may therefore say that it tends to reveal his character: in particular, his weaknesses. As for the hero's servants, they accentuate his comic nature by their observations, but at the same time, by their affection for him, demonstrate that he is not entirely bad.

We have mentioned the servants' involvement in schemes above. Let us now see how these schemes serve to further reveal the comic hero's character. The essential point to keep in mind here is that almost every comic hero in Molière eventually succumbs to a stratagem invented by the other characters. Why is this so? Generally because he is blinded by his own preoccupations, and because the instigators of the scheme are clever enough to flatter these preoccupations, and thus lull his suspicions.

To begin with Mascarille: his strategems are infinite, of course, but through many of them we may notice that there runs a common theme: that of money. This is the source of Pandolfe's hold over Lélie, and a similar kind of parental control exercised through money is to be found in later plays. We are therefore repeatedly reminded of the lifeless, inhuman nature of the hold exercised over the young; the egocentricity of the old expresses itself in this purely material way. There is no comic hero in L'Étourdi, so that we cannot see a downfall occasioned by his obsessions. With Harpagon we come closer to this situation, for La Flèche ends the play by stealing his cassette. The old man finally accepts his son's marriage in exchange for the

return of his money.

This theme reaches its full expansion with M. Jourdain. Here Covielle's Turkish ceremony is a gross appeal to Jourdain's ambitions, and brings about the marriage, which is exactly what he had hoped to avoid. Thus the scheme utilises Jourdain's obsession to cause his downfall. There could be no clearer revelation of the man's blindness and its causes.

In this way do the servants of the young reveal the comic hero's character through their schemes. But they, along with the hero's own servants, have a second function, that of provocation and comment. Thus Ergaste in the École des Maris understands Sganarelle's character and fixes it in our minds long before Valère realises what he is dealing with (cf. I, iv, vv. 315-336). La Flèche has several clashes with Harpagon, beginning with the famous comic scene (I, iii) in which he is told to show his "other hands." For the spectators, this is an excellent introduction to the miser's avarice and the absurdities into which he is led by it. Later, La Flèche is the one who reads out the terms of Harpagon's loan to his son (II, i), having already acted as go-between in the affair. Thus he again plays a role in one of the play's most comic scenes, and one most revelatory of Harpagon's character. In conversation with Frosine later (II, iv), he gives a vivacious description of the old man, ending: "donner est un mot pour qui il a tant d'aversion, qu'il ne dit jamais: Je vous donne, mais: Je vous prête le bon jour."

Maître Jacques is equally useful in showing us something of Harpagon. He has a major role in the great household scene (III, i). First there is the pantomime as to whether Harpagon is speaking to his "cocher" or his "cuisinier": Jacques changes hats as he changes his office. Needless to say,

this shows the old man's meanness in making one servant do double duty. Next, Jacques speaks of what will be needed for supper, causing this reaction:

HARPAGON, en lui mettant la main sur la bouche

Ah! traître, tu manges tout mon bien.

Then come his famous descriptions of the starving horses and of Harpagon himself as seen by the neighbours. This last provokes the miser to physical violence, in itself a typical reaction of Molière's comic hereos:

HARPAGON, en le battant

Vous êtes un sot, un maraud, un coquin, et un impudent.

Later, Jacques shows that Harpagon can be led to believe anything that appeals to his obsessions, when he accuses Valère of having stolen the lost cassette (III, ii), and the miser immediately seizes on this as the truth.

We have already mentioned Covielle and the way in which his Turkish ceremony reveals both Jourdain's obsession and his blindness. There remains Sganarelle in Dom Juan. The speeches in which he describes his master for our benefit are numerous. His characteristic attitude of confusion (simultaneous attraction and repulsion) reveals the mixture of good and bad in the Don's character. Thus we see from the speech in I, i ("un enragé, un chien, un diable, un Turc, un hérétique ...") that Don Juan is more than just a seducer. He is a man who believes in nothing, and who has made this universal scepticism into an article of faith. In the very outrance of this attitude, he wins the grudging admiration of his servant. Later, Sganarelle provokes

his master to the revealing speech in which he ridiculously compares his seductions to the conquests of Alexander (I, ii). Further major statements ("Je crois que deux et deux sont quatre") are contained in a similar dialogue (III, i). The Don's limitations are shown when he leaves Sganarelle to excuse him in two situations which he cannot handle (with Elvire, I, iii; and with Charlotte and Mathurine, III, i).

Molière's menservants are interesting characters corresponding generally to the type outlined above. In themselves, though they contribute comic moments, they are certainly not major comic figures. Rather, we suggest, they aid in the revelation of the comic hero. What do they let us see of him? A man obsessed by a personal desire (this is seen in their contact with and comments on him); blinded and finally defeated by his monomania and single-mindedness (when he is duped by the plots which they engineer); but human, not wholly bad (since they speak of his better qualities). This portrait is given a further dimension by the female servants in Molière.

Female Servants

We will here consider Lisette of the École des Maris, Dorine of Tartuffe, Nicole of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, and Toinette of the Malade Imaginaire. This leaves out only one servant, Flipote of Tartuffe, whose role is insignificant.

In background, the women servants are similar to the men. They are simply servants; that is, women of lower class background who are dependent for their material existence on the family in which they serve. Lisette is the particular servant of Léonor, whereas the other three are simply attached to the family at large. In this respect they are unlike the male servants, who

always serve either the comic hero or a jeune premier. The women are thus not defined by their attachment to any individual. Rather, they are trusted servants of long standing who have been accepted into the very life of the family and have thus risen beyond their nominally inferior status. They act as catalysts and general commentators, moving freely between the comic hero, his wife and children and the various others who have contact with the household. To some extent, they are in the position of a Shakespearian fool, the jester of medieval tradition who was allowed to say things that powerful courtiers would not have dared to utter.[3] They do not instigate plots (except for Toinette), but they do play an important role in the family's revolt against the comic hero's despotism. Their relative freedom is combined with a common sense, frank and honest character which brings them to express their opinions more openly than any other group examined here. In fact, they often confront the comic hero in a series of outstanding scenes which we shall here designate as "Altercation Scenes." In these, they clash directly with the hero over one of two points: his obsession, or his treatment of the young. By their spirit and boldness, by their quick-wittedness and often by somewhat slapstick physical methods, they reduce the hero to a state of rage and desperation. At the same time, they provide us with some of the richest moments of comedy in Molière's plays. These scenes are worthy of being singled out as important and characteristic, for they contain the essence of the female servants' contribution to these comedies. They are a direct confrontation between the oppressor (the comic hero) and the doughtiest

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[3] cf. Feste's conversation with Olivia in Twelfth Night, I, v.

representatives of the oppressed. The woman servants are in a sense taking revenge for everyone else over the common tyrant. They are inflicting a minor punishment upon the individual whom Molière himself punishes at the end by bringing about his defeat. Thus the author puts every weapon in his comic arsenal at their disposal: mental agility, verbal humour, technical tricks such as repetition or inversion, jeux de scène, even vulgarity, and slapstick. At the same time, it is generally a joyous atmosphere which hangs over these Altercation Scenes. The humour is gay and infectious rather than sharp or bitter. Thus we see once again that Molière is presenting us not with automata, but with human beings. His comic heroes, rendered ridiculous by these quick-witted women, are shown to be vulnerable. They merit only chastisement, not disgrace and despair, and so the play itself remains within the bounds of comedy.

The women servants add a warmth and humanity to the comic aspect of the play which tends to belie Bergson's contention that laughter is purely intellectual and unemotional.[4] In themselves, they are almost never laughable: we laugh with, not at, them. In one sense, this is explicable in

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[4] Oeuvres, p. 388

terms of Bénichou's theory that Molière satirises only bourgeois attitudes.[5] In another, it reinforces the general theory of this thesis, according to which the groups provide a dramatic conflict for the central character, but are subordinate to him in comic and dramatic interest. Keeping this principle in mind, let us now examine the contribution which the female servants make to our understanding of the comic hero.

Character

The character of these women provides a contrast to that of the comic hero. As we have observed, they are commonsensical, frank and down-to-earth, but shrewd at the same time. Several instances of this may be cited. Thus Lisette in the École des Maris tells Sganarelle with vivacity that he is a fool to try to keep a wife faithful by locking her up:

> C'est nous inspirer presque un désir de pécher
> Que montrer tant de soins de nous en empêcher;
> Et si par un mari je me voyais contrainte,
> J'aurais fort grande pente à confirmer sa crainte.
> (I, ii, 157-160)

Molière also gives the last word of the play (in a similar strain) to Lisette.

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[5] Paul Bénichou, Morales du grand siècle (Paris: NRF, 1948). The author sees Molière as reflecting the aristocratic spirit of his age, which found the bourgeois ethic detestable and ridiculous. We are in agreement with him, with the reservation that the bourgeois character of the comic hero is more significant in his approach, which has a sociological and historical slant, than in ours, which is concerned primarily with literature as such. We do not conceive of the comic hero as a bourgeois with a difficult character, but as a man with a difficult character who also happens to be a bourgeois.

cf. the view of J. J. Weiss, similar to Bénichou's but more limited in its scope: "Quand il place le bourgeois et le noble en face l'un de l'autre, le bourgeois est toujours accablé." (Molière, p. 87)

In any case, such approaches are salutary corrections to the familiar exaggerations of for example Gustave Larroumet: "(Molière) représente l'esprit bourgeois dans la littérature du 17e siecle." (La Comédie de Molière: l'Homme et le Milieu, Paris: Hachette, 1900, p. 53).

Dorine in Tartuffe is a major character, and her personality is fully displayed for us. Just as Lisette sees through Sganarelle's scheme, so Dorine sees through Tartuffe and anyone else of the same feather. She does not temper her language even in front of Mme. Pernelle, speaking of Tartuffe's "hypocrisie" and describing him as a "gueux" (I, ii). In two fine descriptive speeches she disposes of two other hypocrites, Daphne and Orante, the general theme of here attack being this:

> Ceux de qui la conduite offre le plus à rire
> Sont toujours sur autrui les premiers à médire.
> (I, i, 105-106)

She tells Orgon how ridiculous is his idea of marrying his daughter to a "bigot" (II, ii); and exhorts Mariane on this subject (II, iii), becoming enraged when the girl rather impractically suggests suicide as a way out. She shows remarkable understanding of Mariane's character (for, after all, Dorine is only a servant) when she describes the social pleasures that await Tartuffe's wife. She speaks of his numerous "oncles" and "cousins", of visits to "Madame la baillive et Madame l'élue," of "Fagotin et les marionettes." Such a description of petty bourgeois entertainment is of course repulsive to the sensitive Mariane. Later, Dorine in a famous speech strikes to the root of Tartuffe's hypocrisy. He asks her to cover her décolletage; she replies

> Je vous verrais nu du haut jusques en bas
> Que toute votre peau ne me tenterait pas.
> (III, ii, 867-868)

The point we are making here is that the servants' bon sens enables

them to see through any kind of affectation. Thus Nicole in the Bourgeois Gentilhomme is overcome by laughter at the sight of Jourdain's absurd clothes (III, i). She also objects to the hangers-on who surround him: "Vous devriez au moins fermer [votre porte] à certaines gens" (ibid.).

Toinette in Le Malade Imaginaire is equally perspicacious. She tells Argan that Fleurant and Purgon are using him simply as a "vache à lait" (I, ii); she mocks the affectations of Thomas Diafoirus (II, v); she sees through the schemes of Béline, and even suggests the trick which shows Béline in her true colours (III, xi, xii).

In summary, therefore, these women penetrate to the heart of affectation and hypocrisy. They reveal the real nature of the people who flock around the comic hero, and throw the latter's blindness into sharper relief. This revelatory function is their great contribution to the plays. We will glance briefly at the role which they play in the actual plot in order to demonstrate that in this respect they are less important than the male servants.

Role in the Plot

Of our four servants, only Toinette plays a major role in the intrigue. She, of course, invents both the travesty of medical ceremonies which end the play, and the trick which reveals the true nature of Béline. It is interesting to speculate on why Molière gives her this unusually active role: we may note that Le Malade Imaginaire contains no male servant, and no normal (i.e. faithful) wife. In the absence of these elements, it is left to the female servant to carry most of the burden of opposition to the despot. She must oppose him verbally (in other plays, the wife helps with this), and invent a plan to defeat him (elsewhere, a manservant often does this).

Toinette, perhaps for these reasons, carries an unusual burden.

The other women act as allies of the oppressed and oppose the comic hero, but in word and attitude rather than action. Lisette tells Isabelle what she thinks of Sganarelle:

> Ma foi, je l'envoirais au diable avec sa fraise[6]
> (I, ii, 83)

Nicole is passively involved in the plot herself as the mistress of Covielle, whose success in love depends on that of his master. She also provides moral support for Mme. Jourdain in a confrontation with her husband (III, iii).

Dorine helps the young people by smoothing out their dépit amoureux (II, iv); she advises them to invent excuses to delay the marriage to Tartuffe (II, iv). She counsels Damis to rely on his mother's influence (III, i) and to control his impetuosity. In general, though, it is clear that the women servants are not instrumental in the conduct of the plot.

Altercation Scenes

They come into their own, however, in the altercation scenes in which they directly confront the comic hero. We will designate these scenes as "altercations" here because they contain battles (usually verbal, but sometimes physical) between servant and master. In addition to the qualities

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[6]This in itself is revealing, since the fraise at this time was an old-fashioned article of clothing. Sganarelle's adoption of it gives a clue to his reactionary character: it is Lisette who reminds us of this detail.

described above, the servants here display wit, intelligence and a certain playfulness which is evident in the desire to provoke the hero to an outburst of passion. Beyond the qualities of the two protagonists, Molière throws in every comic device in his repertoire; and it is all crowned by a playful gaiety which sweeps the reader into a euphoria of mingled joy and laughter.

There are a number of scenes of this kind. We may cite that between Dorine and Orgon (Tartuffe, II, ii); between Nicole and M. Jourdain (Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme,III, ii and iii); and two involving Toinette and Argan (Le Malade Imaginaire, I ii; I, v). In the latter play there is a similar confrontation (III, x) in which Toinette makes a fool of her master; however, we will not discuss it here, since she appears disguised as a doctor and not in her authentic personality.

The four chief scenes cited above are the most obvious instances of the clash between master and servant. There are many others in which the servant brings out her master's character more indirectly. However, the altercation scenes are the most typical; and we will here analyse Tartuffe II,ii as representative of them all.

In this scene, Dorine begins by telling Orgon that she finds the thought of Mariane's marriage to Tartuffe incredible. Here, of course, she is taking the part of the young (the oppressed) against the comic hero (the oppressor). She provokes him, saying that he will never be believed; she ridicules him:

> Quoi? se peut-il, Monsieur, qu'avec l'air d'homme sage
> Et cette large barbe au milieu du visage,
> Vous soyez assez fou pour vouloir? ...
> (II, ii, 473-475)

She criticises Tartuffe openly, calling him a "gueux." She suggests that such a marriage will lead Mariane into loss of her virtue (by taking a lover) and that this will therefore be Orgon's fault. Yet her reasons for saying all this are, she announces (and we cannot doubt her), these:

> Je n'en parle, Monsieur, que pour votre intérêt
> (Ibid., 543)

After the comedy afforded by her wit, vivacity, and directness, Molière now offers us a series of technical tricks and jeux de scène. First, Dorine interrupts Orgon with each sentence that he attempts to deliver to his daughter. Next, she interrupts only when his back is turned, stopping as soon as he turns around. Then she insists that her remarks are only intended for herself. This last brings Orgon to the point of physical violence (the typical reaction of the frustrated tyrant in Molière); but every time he braces himself for a blow, she falls silent. The atmosphere is now openly farcical: Orgon even asks her "Que ne parles-tu?" to which she replies "Je n'ai rien à me dire." (Ibid., 574) Finally she runs off with a parting shot, whereupon he strikes out but of course misses her.

Here, certainly, is one of the high points of Molière's art. The revelation of character goes hand in hand with great richness of comedy, and over it all hangs a joyous atmosphere of amusement and affection (for the servants do, in the end, seek their masters' real welfare).

Summary

In summary, we may say that the female servants are larger personalities

than the male. Indeed, they exist in their own right, beyond the revelations which they give us of the comic hero. They play little part in the mechanics of the plot (except for Toinette), but the fullness of their individuality is well displayed in their altercations with the hero. They have no fear of him, so they show us more of him than the menservants do. By their expression of bon sens, they reveal how far their master has erred from this attitude; they reveal the depth of opposition to his tyranny by their alliances with the wives and the young; they enable us to see the true nature of the caricatural figures surrounding the hero; and they make the latter ridiculous, chiefly by playing on his obsession until he is provoked into a rage. In this connection, we must comment on the physical reaction of Molière's comic heroes. Their ultimate weapon is physical force; they attempt to slap or strike their tormentors. But this, of course, is what makes them appear most inhuman. Molière's stage directions[7] make them act like mechanical puppets as they lash out furiously: finally, they always miss their target or hit the wrong person. Thus the highest point of passion to which their obsession takes them is at the same time the moment in which they appear most inhuman and ridiculous. So close is the link between comedy and obsession in Molière.

The women-servants add something to our understanding of the comic hero, and to the pleasure which we take in him. A further contribution is made by the wives.

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[7] e.g. in the above scene, Tartuffe, II, iii.

Chapter IV: The Wives: The Comic Hero's Background

The characters to be treated under this heading are Mme Jourdain of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Elmire of Tartuffe, and Elvire of Dom Juan.

We will omit Béline of Le Malade Imaginaire since she is a schemer who really seeks only to profit from her husband's blindness. She welcomes the news of his death and describes him in tones of extrême disgust (III, xiii: "Un homme incommode à tout le monde, malpropre, dégoûtant, sans cesse un lavement ou une medécine dans le ventre..."); clearly, she could in no sense be considered a normal wife. Rather, we consider her as a Parasite, and discuss her in the chapter devoted to those individuals. Interestingly, Molière makes her Argan's second wife. Could this be because he had a certain conception of a wife which he attempted to present with consistency? If true, this would certainly be an argument in favour of our scheme, which is based on the idea of a number of similar groups of characters repeated from play to play. Certainly, as we have observed above, Toinette plays an unusually important role for a servant in Le Malade Imaginaire: this may well be because she is compensating for the absence of a wife in the dramatic structure of the play.[1]

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[1] This argument might seem to be vitiated by the fact that Elmire in Tartuffe is also a second wife, yet is faithful and devoted. It is quite possible however that Molière would have preferred to make her a first wife like the others whom she resembles in character, but was prevented from so doing by the exigencies of the situation. Orgon is middle-aged, so his first wife would presumably be of the same age and thus unattractive to Tartuffe. In order for the latter's lechery to be displayed, he must be confronted with a young and attractive woman: to make this plausible, Elmire becomes Orgon's second wife.

The three wives whom we shall examine exhibit definite similarities in function, but they constitute a small group, so that differences in character are more evident here than in our other groups. Three is a small sample to work with, though we feel that the Wives are definitely differentiated enough from the other groups to be treated on their own. They have both a particular dramatic function and an important personal relationship with the Comic Hero which enables them to reveal his background and character in a way which is impossible for the other groups. Furthermore, while not significant in numbers, the Wives are of great importance in the individual works in which they appear; and one of them, Mme Jourdain, is among Molière's most remarkable creations.

Before proceeding to a detailed examination, we may make some general observations about the comic function of Mme Jourdain and Elmire with relation to their husbands, the Comic Heroes.

Both these women come from the same background and social class as their husbands, but are unaffected by their manias, and resolutely remain themselves throughout the play. They wish nothing better than for the household to be returned to the old state of things, so that they may once more preside over the linen, receive guests, and play with their grandchildren. Like the servants, they regard their husband's peculiarities as temporary or incidental, and maintain their affection for him. Though they are bourgeois, we scarcely laugh at them, for they have a fund of good sense rooted in their personality and upbringing, and a good measure of intelligence as well.

Within the situation of the play, they suffer the results of their husbands' stupidities more than the servants, but are less subject to constraint

than the children. As a result, they play an intermediate role, seeking to aid their children in the pursuit of the latter's desires, and acquiescing in schemes when necessary. Their contribution to the work as a whole lies to a great extent in the revelation of another part of their spouse's character. They remind us of his background and origins, of what he would be like if normal, and thus reinforce the idea that his monomania is a kind of disease or aberration from his normal self. We realise more profoundly that Molière is presenting a peculiarity, something which is not normal, that he is using laughter to reveal a particular kind of failing to us. This is the interweaving of comic and moral themes to which we made reference in our introductory discussion of Chapter I.

Lastly, the wives serve in some degree to bring out the comic in their husbands. The source of this is the gulf which has opened between them, making mutual comprehension or appreciation very difficult. Thus Orgon in a famous scene completely forgets to ask about his wife's health during his absence, ignores Dorine's comments, and mechanically repeats "Et Tartuffe?".[2] Even in face of such treatment as this, the wives do not become alienated emotionally. They retain affection for their errant husbands, so that the relationship between the two remains unembittered. The good humour maintained by the wives and servants contributes in no small degree to the tone of Molière's comedy, which is generally gay, happy, and full of joie de vivre. They are important in creating that peculiarly Molièresque atmosphere which has been remarked upon by many critics and sometimes even seen as the source of his comic effects.[3]

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[2] Le Tartuffe, I, iv.

[3] see p.29 above.

We will now examine the Wives individually, but as far as possible from the same viewpoint, ending with a conclusion in which we discuss their similarities.

Madame Jourdain

Mme Jourdain is Molière's most affectionately drawn portrait of s bourgeois wife. Despite her lack of elegance, even of intuition (as when in V, vi she obdurately refuses to understand the point of the Turkish ceremony), it is impossible not to like her. We have mentioned our general agreement with Bénichou's argument that Molière satirises the bourgeois: here, surely, is an exception. Simple though she may appear, her role in the play is complex, for she provides a constant contrast with her husband. Almost every quality she displays serves to bring out the contrary in her husband; thus even her failings reveal complementary failings in M. Jourdain. When she shows incomprehension of his plans, for example, we become aware of his gullibility in believing these plans at all; her directness of expression with Dorante reveals the false and exaggerated politeness which her husband attempts to display. Here, therefore, Molière performs the remarkable comic feat of bringing together two amusing characters whose very proximity is a further source of the comic for us. If the aristocrats of the 17th century laughed at Mme Jourdain's simplicity, they forgot the complexity of her dramatic role, which makes her an infinitely more valuable character in the play than any honnête homme or raisonneur could be.

In character Mme Jourdain displays several well-marked traits. Firstly, she has inner strength and a totally unashamed acceptation of herself and her position in life. Thus she speaks at length on her and her husband's

ancestry, but with no trace of shame (III, xii: "Descendons-nous tous deux que de bonne bourgeoisie?"); she not only does not desire false status, but actively rejects it in desiring Cléonte as a son-in-law (ibid., "Les alliances avec plus grand que soi sont toujours sujettes à de fâcheux inconvénients."). The latter, in Molière's view, was no doubt the only reasonable position, if we think of the sufferings to which he subjects another character who makes this mistake, George Dandin. Furthermore, Mme Jourdain is not impressed by rank as such: discovering her husband at table with Dorante and Dorimène, she vigorously reproaches the latter, replying to her husband's protests "Je me moque de leur qualité" (IV, ii). The practical result of this admirable pride in herself is that she is not subject to the blindness which afflicts M. Jourdain. She is only too aware of the reason for Dorante's constant visits (and does not hesitate to tell him so), nor is she taken in by Dorimène's supposed love for M. Jourdain. Finally, we may mention that she accepts the limitations of her age as well as her station. M. Jourdain, like almost all Molière's comic heroes, forgets his age in the pursuit of younger women and the other pleasures of youth. His wife does her best to bring him back to reality: "Est-ce que vous voulez apprendre à danser pour quand vous n'aurez plus de jambes?"; "N'irez-vous point l'un de ces jours au collège vous faire donner le fouet, à votre âge?" (III, iii).

It is perhaps this firmness of character which leads Mme Jourdain into the directness, one might say the crudity of her expression. Molière fills her discourse with colourful popular expressions; "Il le gratte par où il se démange" (III, iii); in reply to Dorante (III, v) "J'ai la tête plus grosse que le poing, et si elle n'est pas enflée." While comic and picturesque in

itself, such language helps us to realise the artificiality of M. Jourdain's politeness when in presence of Dorante or Dorimène.

Though M. Jourdain seeks to acquire knowledge in his declining years, Mme Jourdain is uninstructed and in no way ashamed of it. She is unimpressed by Jourdain's knowledge of phonetics (III, iii), and indeed dismisses it as nonsense: "Vous devriez envoyer promener tous ces gens-là avec leurs fariboles." (ibid.). Despite this, she retains the astuteness which her husband has lost. She sees the reality of "hanter la noblesse": in III, iii she turns the conversation from the acquisition of aristocratic virtues to the fact that Dorante is borrowing Jourdain's money. She realises that her husband is pursuing an amorous affair (III, iii: "Je suis la plus trompée du monde, ou il y a quelque amour en campagne"); no one is able to obscure her clarity of vision. More than this, she has a quick native wit which enables her to keep up easily with the cultivated Dorante in the exchange of rudeness, and indeed to make her very lack of polish show to good effect (cf. the series of exchanges in III, v).

Such is Mme Jourdain's character; providing a constant contrast to her husband, she remains unwaveringly loyal to him and their common way of life. In this also, she is a typical Molièresque wife; for this reason, like the other wives, she plays only a limited role in the plot.

Molière's wives tend to be involved in the plot against their husband, but not as principals (this being the province of servants or young people). In the Bourgeois Gentilhomme it is Covielle who invents the Turkish ceremony. Mme Jourdain is certainly opposed to her husband's plans, but her honesty is such that she limits her opposition to the most open methods: direct confrontation in defense of Cléonte (III, xii), or even open reproach to

Dorimène in defense of her own honour (IV, iii). She does not mince words, but she will not stoop to deceit.

Our point about avoidance of deceit is especially clear in the last scene of the play, where Mme Jourdain obtusely refuses to understand the significance of the Turkish ceremony. Comic in itself, the scene reveals the honesty which she carries to its furthest point; we will take it as indicative of her character. Her chief characteristic, thus is truth to herself. She is incapable of appreciating or understanding what has no meaning within the confines of her universe. As she observes to Jourdain (III, iii): "Tout cela est fort nécessaire pour conduire votre maison." This makes her comic in herself, but by contrast reveals her husband's fault, which is the very opposite: he strives absurdly to be untrue to himself, to take on qualities quite unfitted to his age and condition. Every quality of Mme Jourdain's we have mentioned: acceptation of her character and position, refusal to be impressed by rank, directness, lack of education, natural astuteness, sharpness in repartee, serves to bring out its opposite in Jourdain. Her very presence on the stage next to him reminds us of what he probably once was (i.e. similar to her) and what he is now attempting to become. To this general notion we may add three particular instances of contrast: her appeal to other people, her incomprehension of Jourdain, and the reaction she causes in him.

The idea of society is not much stressed in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. In other plays (e.g. L'École des Maris), the comic hero is contrasted with a aristocratic or elegant social group whose way of life he rejects: this reminds us of his self-centredness. In Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme such a theme would be paradoxical since the comic force of the play is directed in a sense against

Jourdain's desire to join "society" (in the limited sense). Nevertheless, the theme does arise, and especially in the words of Mme Jourdain. She asks him "avez-vous envie qu'on se raille partout de vous?" When he asks who in fact is laughing at him, she replies "Tout ce monde-là est un monde qui a raison, et qui se moque de vous." (III, iii). We will not belabour the point; but it is clear that an appeal to the general common sense of the social group is being made, and that this tends to reinforce our impression of Jourdain's solipsism.

The contrast which Mme Jourdain makes with her husband reaches its most comic expression in the lack of comprehension of his attitude which she displays. The origin of our amusement here is complex: we laugh at both individually (M. Jourdain because of the peculiarity of his plans, Mme Jourdain because of her obtuseness) and also at them together (since her lack of understanding serves to heighten his absurdity for us, in addition to incensing them both). In one remarkable instance, verbal humour is added to the other elements: Jourdain has just been made Mamamouchi, and is seeking to explain the nature of this honour:

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN
Mamamouchi, c'est-à-dire, en notre langue, Paladin

MADAME JOURDAIN
Baladin! Etes-vous en âge de danser des ballets?

The comic of these two short lines is of great richness. We have the foolish pomposity of Jourdain, to whom the word Mamamouchi is redolent of great honour, the down-to-earth abruptness of Mme Jourdain: this is comedy of character. We have bathos in the transition from visions of glory to the mental picture of Jourdain dancing a ballet; we have verbal humour in the misunderstanding

Paladin/Baladin. Less complex, perhaps, but equally revealing, is Mme Jourdain's stupefaction over Jourdain's earlier attempts (III, iii) to distinguish between prose and poetry.

The direct result of Mme Jourdain's refusal to understand her husband's peculiarities is his reaction of contempt and superiority: "Taisez-vous, ma servante, et ma femme"; "Ô l'étrange chose que d'avoir affaire à des bêtes" (III, iii); after she expresses the desire to have Cléonte as a son-in-law, he adds "Voilà bien les sentiments d'un petit esprit, de vouloir demeurer toujours dans la bassesse." (III, xii). Clearly, the reaction of M. Jourdain to his wife's strictures serves to exaggerate his foolishness for us. Affecting an unconvincing superiority, he renders himself laughable rather than her by his elephantine attempts at sarcasm.

In summary, while a memorable and comic character in herself, Mme Jourdain serves at every turn, either by contrast or reaction, to remind us of her husband's foolishness. A similar but much less definite role is played by Elmire.

Elmire

In herself, Elmire is a less interesting character than Mme Jourdain. From the point of view of personality, therefore, she presents less contrast with her husband than does Mme Jourdain. There is a possible explanation for this, however, insofar as one of the major points of the plot is the attempted seduction of Elmire by Tartuffe. For such a seduction to be possible or even plausible, Elmire needs to be firstly an attractive woman, and secondly a woman of patience and tolerance. Had Tartuffe made his declaration of love to Mme Jourdain, the play could not have continued as it does. The latter would have given him short shrift indeed; had her husband not believed her, she would

no doubt have taken her own measures against the intruder. Thus the plot requires Elmire to have a certain kind of character. When we find her to be irreproachably honourable, understanding, tolerant, even charitable, we must remember that a more spirited personality would have made the present plot impossible. This is the first point to remember. The second is the importance of this attempted seduction in the action of the play since Orgon is a witness to it. It is in fact of central importance, insofar as it is Tartuffe's great mistake. It comes at the end of Act IV, the traditional moment in classical theatre for the precipitation of the final catastrophe or dénouement. After this scene, and the revelations it brings, a fundamental change must take place in the attitude of Orgon towards Tartuffe. Crucial for the act, the scene is equally so for the revelation of the characters of Tartuffe and Orgon: the latter is shown that his most cherished ideas have failed him, that the world which he has created for himself is artificial and grounded on an illusion; at the same time, he is subjected to the ridicule of hiding under a table to watch his wife being seduced.

The plot, the characters of Orgon and Tartuffe: these are in fact the three most important threads of which the play is composed. Any scene which is of crucial importance for these three elements must be considered the most important of the entire work. But if this is the case, the plot must be interpreted from a different standpoint. What is actually happening in this scene (IV, v-vii)? One man is trying to seduce another man's wife, while the husband watches from concealment. In other words, we are observing a variation on the ancient theme of cuckoldry. This is not to minimise the importance of the hypocrisy theme in Tartuffe: Molière quite clearly wishes to put this in

the forefront, and even in this scene, Tartuffe goes to some lengths to justify his conduct from a religious point of view. Nevertheless, the relatively new theme of hypocrisy is expressed within an ancient framework - the story of the cuckolded husband, which is time-honoured, universal (cf. Chaucer and Boccaccio) and must have been familiar to Molière through the medieval tradition. La Jalousie du Barbouillé demonstrates Molière's early acquaintance with the theme; L'École des Femmes represents a transposition of it into truly Molièresque terms. Thus we should not be surprised to find it again, even at the heart of one of Molière's most "serious" works. Indeed, if we consider Tartuffe from this point of view, it is easier to relate the play to Molière's other major works. If Tartuffe is essentially the story of a man who is nearly cuckolded, then Orgon becomes the central character. As such, he can better assume the role of Comic Hero into which we have cast him along with the protagonists of the other plays. The deceit under which he suffers is then seen to be caused by his blindness rather than by Tartuffe's hypocrisy: so intent is he on his own obsession (which here takes the form of devotion to Tartuffe), that he comes near to the ultimate humiliation of farce: cuckoldry. This interpretation, we feel, also makes the work funnier, for it pushes into the background the sinister figure of Tartuffe and enables us to see him as one of a long line of parasites who profit by the Comic Hero's blindness to live off him (thus we learn at the end of the play that Tartuffe is not a true hypocrite, but an impostor). Tartuffe differs from the other parasites in the degree of his vice; he takes his parasitism to the ultimate point, that of attempting to take the host's wife as well as his goods.

Orgon, conversely, appears as the man who performs an extraordinary feat: that of delivering a faithful wife into the hands of one who is eagerly

seeking to take advantage of her. For this is what happens: Elmire is entirely faithful to Orgon, and it is he who causes her situation to become compromising. Here indeed is a new variation on the traditional situation of stupid husband and malicious wife (as we see it in L'École des Maris for example). In Tartuffe the husband is so stupid (being blinded by his obsession) that any but a devoted wife would be tempted to revenge herself upon him for his lack of feeling.

Consideration of the role of Elmire along the lines suggested above therefore leads one to envision the play from a somewhat different angle. As in many other plays, we have here a Comic Hero, a Parasite, and a Wife; the comic hero brings misfortune upon himself because he is blinded by his obsession. In this case, Molière averts the final indignity (since Tartuffe is after all not simply a farce on the subject of cuckoldry). However, since this scheme is at the basis of the plot, it is necessary that it be allowed to work itself out. Thus Elmire is required to be a woman of patience and forbearing; the result being that she does not contrast so strikingly with her husband as does for example Mme Jourdain. It is primarily in the plot that Molière uses Elmire to point up her husband's character, not in the clash of personalities. Nonetheless, she does have a definite personality which contrasts at least indirectly with that of Orgon: we will now examine the chief aspects of this.

Firstly, Elmire is faithful to her husband. She is no typical wife of the French medieval farce, concealing her lover in a cupboard or introducing him through the back door. On the contrary, she withstands Tartuffe's approaches not simply with determination, but with amusement. He makes no impression whatsoever upon her, and she does not even see fit to relate the

incident to her husband.[4] She is an irreproachable spouse, indeed; yet she has no wish to parade her virtue or even the vice of others, as we can see by comparing her reaction to Tartuffe with that of Damis. The latter, hot-headed as he is, cries that he wishes to

> ...détromper mon père, et lui mettre en plein jour
> L'âme d'un scélérat qui vous parle d'amour.
> (III, iv, 1027-28)

Elmire, who is really the injured party, displays the attitude of calmness and maturity that we have just observed.

She is charitable towards all: Mme Pernelle (I,i), whom she does not reproach in the slightest for her ill-temper; Orgon, whom she always treats with respect (she warns him before the confrontation with Tartuffe: "Ce sont vos intérêts, vous en serez le maître" [IV, iv, 1385]); even towards Tartuffe, to whom she finally apologises:

> C'est contre mon humeur que j'ai fait tout ceci
> Mais on m'a mise au point de vous traiter ainsi
> (IV, vii, 1551-52)

She is intelligent, for she has developed a reasoned attitude towards life:

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[4] cf. her words to Damis:

> Une femme se rit de sottises pareilles,
> Et jamais d'un mari n'en trouble les oreilles.
> (III, v, 1033-34)

This unwillingness to speak to Orgon, of course, has its value in delaying the action, as we have seen; a Mme Jourdain no doubt would have reacted in such a way as to bring things to a head immediately.

J'aime qu'avec douceur nous nous montrions sages
(IV, iii, 1329)

Finally, she has the understanding and perspicacity necessary to lead Tartuffe as she wishes, convincing him that after her first refusal she still in fact has a penchant for him. What a contrast with her husband, hopelessly duped by the man whom she dupes with ease herself! Indeed, Elmire recognises Orgon's blindness:

A voir ce que je vois, je ne sais plus que dire,
Et votre aveuglement fait que je vous admire.
(IV, iii, 1313-14).

yet she never makes an issue out of it. Until the very end of the play, her only reward for all these qualities is complete ingratitude from Orgon (thus in I, iv he ignores the news of her illness, thinking only of Tartuffe in the famous repetition "Le pauvre homme!").

What sort of man could blind himself to such qualities? Yet Elmire in no way attempts to take advantage of Orgon, as we shall now see.

In Tartuffe there is not, as in other plays, a malicious plot against the Comic Hero instigated within his own house. It is Tartuffe himself, rather, who leads the action, aided chiefly by Orgon's own stupidity. We do however find the usual opposition of the Comic Hero with the other groups: Servants, Raisonneurs, Parasites, Young People, and Wife. In this, Elmire is typical. She is aware of Orgon's aberrations, and sides with Mariane and Damis against their father. Her role in the action is entirely constructive from the point of view of Orgon, for she simply disabuses him of his errors. Here we must stress again that her importance lies in the underlying plot as

we have outlined it: that of Orgon's cuckoldry. If, after the impression we have of her, Orgon allows the situation to progress to such an extreme, we can have only the lowest opinion of his perspicacity.

Our interpretation of Elmire's role in this should now be clear, for it is based on the general interpretation of the plot given above. Elmire is not at all comic in herself; in character she lacks the definite outlines of a Mme Jourdain and so does not provide an obvious contrast with Orgon. This is not to say that there is no contrast: by her very goodness, Elmire puts Orgon into an unfavourable light. That is on the moral plane; on the comic plane, Elmire takes us back to one of the fundamental comic situations. So blind is Orgon, she reminds us, that there is no need for him to be cuckolded by a cunning wife: he almost brings the situation upon the best of wives; and, like all Molière's comic heroes, he courts disaster by the very pursuit of what seems to him most good.

The role of Elvire in Dom Juan is to be seen as similar to that of Elmire. Lacking the strong personality of Mme Jourdain, she brings out the character of the comic hero more obliquely: through plot and situation. Even in this, she is of less importance than Elmire. One reason for this is that the plot of Dom Juan cannot be reduced to a basic, traditional comic situation in which the wife is of paramount importance, as we attempted to show for Tartuffe. The obvious reason for the eclipse of the wife in this play is the role of Sganarelle, Don Juan's constant companion and unwilling admirer. With such a powerful relationship already existing, there is no need for a third central character; Molière's treatment of the religious theme in the play (attacks on religion by Don Juan followed by burlesque

attempts to defend it from Sganarelle) no doubt led him naturally into the creation of Sganarelle's character as a foil to the Don. A wife could scarcely play such a role: thus Elvire is of necessity forced into the background. In our opinion, her importance lies in the series of clues to the character of Don Juan which she affords us. She does not provide a clear and major contrast; but both scenes in which she appears in fact offer useful clues to the Comic hero's personality.

Elvire's character is not of great interest. She is virtuous, in love with Don Juan, and determined to save him if she can; yet she is not weak, for she does not abandon herself to her emotion. She is certainly intelligent, sufficiently so to cause the Don embarrassment and confusion, but beyond this there is little development of her character in the play.

If the essence of the plot is Don Juan's rush to self-destruction, then Elvire is of slight importance in it. She is the first milestone and the last on a path which he traces for himself, but she has not the slightest influence on the direction which the Don follows. Certainly, she warns him solemnly about his sins; but on the terms of our present analysis, this is not significant, for we consider Don Juan as a Comic Hero rather than as a great sinner or a metaphysical rebel: thus we do not think of his transgressions in religious terms.

There is one perhaps purely negative point that should be made about Elvire's role in the plot: she is unwavering in her fidelity to Don Juan. When she first reproaches him with his infidelity (I, iii), she is angry, even sarcastic; but her final warning (IV, vi) is free of any emotion except a disinterested wish for his wellbeing. Unlike her brothers, she never plots

any revenge on her seducer: in this devotion to an unfeeling spouse, she resembles both Mme Jourdain and Elmire.

We offer no general interpretation of the role of Elvire (as we did with the more important role of Elmire): rather we will seek here to analyse individually her two appearances and the deductions which can be made about Don Juan on this basis.

First, a word on her background. We know that Don Juan seduced Elvire from a convent. This is shocking, of course. It confirms our impression of him as a bold and wicked man; but on another plane, it may be seen in terms of Gossman's interpretation: that "[Don Juan's] desire for Elvire was a mediated one, a desire that was inspired in him by jealousy of and rivalry with the object of Elvire's devotion, in this instance, God."[5] In other words, Elvire had for Don Juan only the momentary attraction of any other conquest: but here there is the ultimate attraction of vying with God Himself. We know that the Don is stimulated by jealousy (as with the happy young couple whom he describes in I, ii); we know that he compares himself to Alexander the Great, and his affairs to the great general's battles (ibid.): what worthier rival could there be than God, what more satisfaction for the ego than in defeating the Deity? In this sense, Elvire represents the furthest point to which Don Juan's desire for self-glorification goes. She reminds us that his vanity baulks at nothing.

At the same time, the seduction is scarcely the most impressive manner of challenging God. The Don's grandiose ambitions find only the meanest expression - and in this way he becomes comic. Such, in fact, is the inter-

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[5] Men and Masks, pp. 43-44

pretation we shall give of his character: seeking (as he claims to Sganarelle in I, ii) the utmost freedom, the unlimited impression of his ego upon the world, he chooses the most petty methods to achieve his goal (he seduces peasant girls, he tempts a beggar with money). And even on this small scale, he regularly fails, finding others unwilling to mould themselves to his wishes. If, as Bénichou claims, Don Juan represents "les rêveries du paganisme aristocratique,"[6] then dream and reality must have become very different things for the 17th century aristocrat. It is surely in this sense - the contrast between inflated ambitions and sordid reality, with a complete failure to recognise the latter - that Don Juan is a comic character.

Such is our interpretation of him. It can be read into the story of Elvire's seduction as we have seen; it is evident also in her first appearance (I, iii). Here, in face of Elvire's bitter reproaches, Don Juan is left speechless: he appeals helplessly to his servant to reply to her. As Elvire remarks: "Ah! que vous savez mal vous défendre pour un homme de cour, et qui doit être accoutumé à ces sortes de choses." She mocks him a little by suggesting a series of excuses which he might have used, ending "Voilà comme il faut vous défendre, et non pas être interdit comme vous êtes." Indeed, Don Juan has appeared nonplussed until this point; now he begins to speak, claiming that it was fear of divine revenge which made him leave Elvire. His tone is certainly very different from that which he uses with Charlotte in II, ii, when in the full flood of confidence he makes a series of exaggerated compliments to the peasant girl.

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[6] Morales du grand siècle, p. 168

In Elvire's first appearance, therefore, we catch a glimpse of the side which Don Juan does his best to conceal from us and himself. After Sganarelle's description of him ("le plus grand scélérat que la terre ait jamais porté, un enragé, un chien, un diable, un Turc, un hérétique..."), and his own boasting, we are given a glimpse of the reality which conflicts with the Don's illusions of himself.

Elvire does not reappear until close to the end of the play. Don Juan has pursued his infamous career to a point where we suspect that his punishment is not far off. At this stage (IV, vi), Elvire enters veiled, as a kind of messenger of grace, come to beg him to repent before it is too late. The great sincerity of her words touches Sganarelle, who weeps, but leaves the Don quite unmoved. The latter disregards her appeal, but asks her to stay. She refuses, and leaves. In the next scene, Don Juan reveals to Sganarelle why he had requested her to stay:

> Sais-tu bien que j'ai encore senti quelque peu d'émotion pour elle, que j'ai trouvé de l'agrément dans cette nouveauté, et que son habit négligé, son air languissant et ses larmes ont réveillé en moi quelques petits restes d'un feu éteint?
>
> (IV, vii)

What can this be but idle sensuality, temporarily forgotten in Elvire's absence, but fanned into a momentary flame by her "nouveauté bizarre" and "air languissant"? In his shallowness (one hesitates even to dignify it with the word "cynicism"), Don Juan neglects the whole point of Elvire's visit. He is conscious only of her physical appearance and the agreeable emotion she displays (since it is directed at himself). Here again, therefore, Elvire indirectly reveals the Don's nature: a shallow man, he conceives of life as a matter of

momentary gratification. In fact, Don Juan is seeking profundity (the idea of absolute freedom for the ego) in trivialities (the physical pleasure of the moment). This contrast, added to his failure even in the narrow field of action which he selects, is the source of the comic in his character.

Conclusion

These three Wives are certainly different in personality. Mme Jourdain, strong and definite in opinion, contrasts with her husband in an obvious way. Elmire is less firmly delineated; while Elvire reveals little of herself. We have attempted to explain this attenuation of character in the latter two: the exigencies of the cuckoldry theme in Tartuffe require Elmire to be a relatively calm person; while in Dom Juan, the underlying religious theme perhaps led Molière to create the character of Sganarelle as a contrast to the Don: thus Sganarelle's role displaces that of Elvire into the background.

What features do these individuals then have in common? Above all, the revelation, in different degrees, of their husband's (the Comic Hero's) character. Mme Jourdain accomplishes this chiefly by simple contrast of personality, but also by her incomprehension of his plans and the reaction of contemptuous superiority which she causes in him. She reminds us of what her husband is really like: that is, what he was like before acquiring his obsession with social advancement. Thus we become aware of a comic contrast between Jourdain as he really is (or was), and Jourdain as he wishes to see himself. Elmire provides a less obvious character contrast with Orgon, but plays an essential role in the underlying cuckoldry theme; and by considering this role, we are enabled to see the play from a different, perhaps more comic, point of view. Orgon, rather than Tartuffe, is placed at the centre of the work as the

cuckolded husband who almost brings about his own ruin. As a typical Molièresque Comic Hero, he is led by the blindness of his obsession to do the opposite of what he thinks he is doing: he works against his own interests. In this way, our understanding of Orgon is deepened by Elmire. Elvire, less well defined in character than Elmire, nevertheless provides important clues to the understanding of Don Juan as a man whose ambitions for his ego are limitless, but who expresses these ambitions in the pettiest field, and fails even on that level.

Lastly, we may observe the role played by these women in the action of each play: though opposed to their husbands' obsessions and aligning themselves with those who actively combat it (young people and servants), they remain faithful to him and never seek to injure him or render him ridiculous. Here again we see that the role of Molière's Wives is essentially passive (though no less important for that): by conflict and contrast, they help us to better understand the Comic Hero's background and deeper nature.

Chapter V: The Young People: The Comic Hero in Action

When considering the role of the Young People in the work of Molière, one is immediately confronted with the problem of their numbers. Even in our selection of nine plays, there is a superabundance of individuals. It need hardly be repeated that every comedy of Molière contains at least two young people in love, frustrated in their emotion by the Comic Hero. It would be repetitious, not to say tedious, to enumerate the entire list and then to analyse the situation and function of each one. This possibility of tedium is made more real by the fact that the individuals in question offer no particular interest in their personality: issuing from a lengthy comic tradition, they belong to the conventions, and contribute to the pleasure, which the world of comedy offers us. If Molière, fully aware of their conventional nature, nevertheless uses such individuals in almost all of his comedies, it is no doubt because he wished them to fulfil a function, not in themselves, but rather in regard to the Comic Hero. It is around the latter, the central individual, that these minor characters revolve, and it is his character which they tend to reveal rather than their own. Any other analysis of their importance would of necessity remain superficial and indeed irrelevant to the central preoccupations of Molière. The Young People merit our attention as victims or scapegoats of the Comic Hero; in other words, as those who suffer the results of his actions. Such is the perspective in which we shall examine the Young People in these plays.

Since the Young People offer comparatively little individual variety, we have selected certain of them who rise above the conventional mould in which the others are cast. In these characters, we feel, Molière was not content with the traditional type of the *jeune premier*, but added something of his own individuality

and personality. In the broad outlines of their character and situation, they remain typical of all Molière's Young People, and thus will serve to demonstrate the thesis which we propose here. In the details, however, they have an individuality which makes them more worthy of consideration, for they offer more to interest the audience, and indeed, more of Molière himself.

We will discuss Isabelle, Valère, and Léonor of L'École des Maris, Agnès and Horace of L'École des Femmes, and Cléante, Mariane, Élise and Valère of L'Avare. In addition to the main line of argument pursued through these individuals, we will add notes and observations on other Young People in Molière where it seems that a useful parallel may be drawn.

Isabelle is perhaps the most apparently heartless of Molière's young girls, no doubt because she is in the power of the most extreme of Molière's Comic Heroes, a man utterly unloveable in every way, and who keeps her in a state of humiliating subjection. Agnès also to some extent gives the appearance of being cruel, for she is incapable of loving Arnolphe, and tells him so quite plainly, in the simplicity of her heart. As a representation of human nature in its least artificial condition, unaffected by contact with society, she forms a striking contrast with the calculating Arnolphe, and is famous in her own right as an example of Molière's psychological and artistic powers. Cléante offers us the most emotionally charged of father-son relationships in Molière. He and Harpagon several times show dislike, even contempt, for each other; on one occasion, they are on the point of coming to blows. Harpagon's inhumanity may be felt throughout L'Avare, but especially in his relationship with his son, who is his rival in love, and goes so far as to apply to him for a loan (though unaware at this stage of Harpagon's identity).

The Young People, we feel, reveal the Comic Hero to us in two ways: through opposition of character, and through the plot. In the case of the plot, we are made aware of the Comic Hero's egotism by his obvious and reiterated attempts to force the Young People to do what he wants. He uses any method at his disposal in order to reduce them to obedience; this obedience takes the form of marrying someone whom they do not want, and renouncing the person whom they in fact love. The Comic Hero's intention in this is to gratify his personal desires: thus all the Comic Heroes in our three plays (Sganarelle, Arnolphe, and Harpagon) wish to marry a girl who loves someone else, and stop at nothing in the pursuit of their desires. In the case of Harpagon, there is the additional element of securing a wealthy son-in-law by forcing his daughter into a marriage for which she feels an extreme aversion. The Comic Hero, as we have said, uses any advantage which he may have in order to reduce the Young People to subjection: generally these advantages may be classified under the three headings of financial, legal, and moral. Needless to say, however, Molière does not allow the Comic Hero to triumph. All-powerful at the beginning, he sees his plans gradually thwarted through the play, until at the end love overcomes and his domination is destroyed.

It is tempting to characterise the Young People quite shortly as natural, because they wish only to please themselves and leave other people in peace, and the Comic Hero as unnatural because he is egocentric and attempts to bend others to his will. This would be a false analysis, however, particularly in a historical context. The 17th century moralist, influenced as he often was by the Jansenist religious and philosophical current, tended towards pessimism. This can be seen most evidently in Pascal; in a more secular context, it may be traced in La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère. In them as in other thinkers, <u>amour-propre</u> is

held to be the central element in human psychology. It is upon this emotion that our personality is built - thus it is only natural that we should tend towards egotism. Egotism therefore is our nature: in a sense, it is when we are most egotistic that we are most natural. Human nature is corrupt, in a word, and we have to wage a constant struggle against ourselves in order to observe any principles of morality in our behaviour.

In this context, the development of the concept of honnêteté is perhaps easier to grasp: where amour-propre is seen as the source of corruption, virtue must consist in dominating this amour-propre. The honnête homme is a man who lives according to a philosophy of moderation, who subjects his ego to control by the rational part of his mind. This of course is a valid approach not only in the field of pure ethics, but also in the larger area of social contact as a whole, which concerned the French 17th century perhaps more than ethical considerations as such. The ideal man of society is he who accepts others easily and moves among them with freedom and confidence; such are the raisonneurs of Molière's comedies. On this interpretation, the obvious contrast in Molière would be between his Comic Heroes, who embody the egotism and amour-propre of corrupted human nature, and the raisonneurs, who control these natural faults by the application of reason and the conscious mind. We have attempted to show such an opposition in our chapter on the Raisonneurs.

A similar contrast, though less philosophically clear-cut, may be seen in the Comic Hero's relationship with the Young People. Here we see the most powerful expression of the Comic Hero's corrupted nature: his ego seeks to extend its domination over those who cannot defend themselves. The Young People do not provide such a clear contrast with him as the raisonneurs: their youth and the force of tradition (the conventional nature of the jeune premier) probably plays a part in this. Rather than fight with the Comic Hero, they wish only to pursue

their own natural inclinations and be left alone. It is in this sense only that we may describe them as more natural than the Comic Hero: they seek their happiness with individuals whom they love and who are of similar age and condition to themselves. There is internal evidence to support the idea that in this the Young People are acting in a "natural" fashion: Argan in Le Malade Imaginaire says to Angélique: "Cela est plaisant, oui, ce mot de mariage; il n'y rien de plus drôle pour les jeunes filles: ah! nature! nature!" (I, v).

By the same token, the Comic Hero is unnatural in that he attempts to do things inappropriate to his condition: when he wishes to force the Young People to act against their will, he is not behaving like a father or a guardian; when he amorously pursues a young girl, he is not behaving as an older man should. We will not emphasize the distinction in these terms, however, since it would be false in a 17th century context.

Much the same may be said of humanity and inhumanity in this connection. The word "inhumanity" is occasionally applied to the Comic Hero in this thesis. Such usage, in the 17th century context, might be misleading. So far from being inhuman, the Comic Hero in a sense is more human, since he indulges to the full his natural - human - tendencies towards egotism. We, however, use the word in its connotation of cruel or immoral. The Comic Hero is immoral or inhuman in the sense that he allows his own ego to run unchecked without any consideration for the consequent sufferings of others. As we suggested in our introductory chapter, we believe egotism to be the cardinal sin in Molière. It is at the root of the Comic Hero's nature, and it is what leads him to make others suffer. Causing suffering to others - this, essentially, is the meaning which we ascribe to the words "immoral" and "inhuman". In the final analysis, it is perhaps the meaning which the 17th century would have given to these words. Amour-propre tempts us

into immoral or inhuman behaviour, for it leads us to indulge our whims and desires at the expense of others.

An example of inhumanity in this sense may be found in Tartuffe. Mariane at one stage announces her intention of killing herself if she is forced to marry Tartuffe; she makes this moving appeal to Orgon:

> Mon père, au nom du ciel, qui connaît ma douleur,
> Et par tout ce qui peut émouvoir votre coeur,
> Relâchez-vous un peu des droits de la naissance,
> Et dispensez mes voeux de cette obéissance.
> (IV, iii, 1279-1282)

The Comic Hero's comment is revealing:

> ORGON
> Allons, ferme, mon coeur, point de faiblesse humaine.
> (Ibid., 1293)

Here, then, is the word "human" used by the Comic Hero himself in a sense very close to that which we assign to it in this thesis.

In spite of the philological distinctions outlined above, there remain certain obvious differences between Comic Hero and Young People. One of these may be found in the atmosphere of trust and faith which surrounds the young people, and which contrasts strongly with the aura of suspicion and deceit which hangs around the comic hero. We will examine this contrast as it appears in L'École des Maris and L'École des Femmes. The young people extend something of this trust even to the comic hero, despite the latter's attempts to constrain them. They are not ill-intentioned towards him except insofar as he seeks to frustrate their love. It may safely be said that Molière's characters are never consistently malicious or cruel (except for the odd caricature such as the

Sotenville family in George Dandin): his Young People are no exception.[1] They act against the Comic Hero because he opposes their profoundest desires, and they never seek to wound gratuitously. Isabelle observes that it is only the severity of Sganarelle which forces her to act as she does:

> l'injuste rigueur dont envers moi l'on use
> Dans tout esprit bien fait me servira d'excuse.
> (II, i, 367-368)

Admittedly, Sganarelle suffers at the end of the play, as does Arnolphe in L'École des Femmes, but the blame must be laid at their own door. The Comic Hero calls down suffering upon his own head.

The Young People are intelligent. This is significant, since it provides yet another insight into the Comic Hero's nature. The love-plot involves an attempt on the part of the Young People to escape from the Comic Hero's domination: thus they need to surpass him in quickness and penetration. There

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[1] We make this generalisation in the full knowledge that such sweeping claims are dangerous; certainly, we admit that there are a few exceptions to it. However, exceptions do not necessarily affect the validity of large statements; nothing of importance can be said without recourse to a certain degree of generalisation, for the mere enumeration of isolated cases has no significance whatsoever. There is one character who might be cited as consistently malicious: Tartuffe. He never does anything good, and he does many things that are bad: deceiving his host in order to profit materially, trying to seduce Orgon's wife, throwing him out of his own house. But there is great difficulty in interpreting Tartuffe's character: for example, is he a religious hypocrite, or merely an accomplished confidence trickster who adopts the mask of religion, as he might adopt any other when circumstances require it? Is he a plump, healthy sensualist, as he is sometimes portrayed, or a thin, pale obsessive? It is certainly not clear from the text whether he seeks primarily to injure others (which would be real immorality), or simply to benefit himself without really worrying how this might harm Orgon's family. In these circumstances, it would be misleading to describe him as consistently and deliberately malicious.

is a good example of this in L'Étourdi: Mascarille recounts to Célie a story (I, iv), ostensibly to obtain her advice, but in fact with the intention of revealing Lélie's love for her. Célie understands this without difficulty, and even joins in with the game, explaining her own attitude to Lélie. Trufaldin, hearing all this, understands nothing until Lélie blunders in and reveals all.

Lastly, we may mention the taste for society which Molière's Young People display, and which contrasts powerfully with the solitary egomania of the Comic Hero. Thus in L'École des Maris there is a strong contrast between Ariste's treatment of Léonor and Sganarelle's treatment of Isabelle. The former is allowed to go to balls and assemblies, to dress well, to frequent people of her own age. At the beginning of the play (I, i), Léonor presses Isabelle to go out and take the air with her, but Sganarelle intervenes to prevent this. At the end, when Sganarelle is unknowingly marrying Isabelle to Valère, Léonor arrives fresh from the ball (III, viii).

Such is the character of Molière's Young People: love being the central fact of their existence, they pursue it with all the irresistible force of nature, yet without any intention of gratuitously hurting the Comic Hero who constantly opposes their wishes. Intelligent, enjoying the company of others, they use their talents in the service of their great aim: marriage. In character, therefore, they provide a definite contrast with the Comic Hero. Where he seeks to bend others to his will, they wish only to fulfil themselves; where he seeks to be the centre of his own small world, they are expansionist, and enjoy the company of others.

We will now trace these elements through the three plays cited above as offering the most fertile ground for our inquiries.

In L'École des Maris there are three Young People: Isabelle, Valère, and

Léonor: Léonor is the ward of Ariste, and Isabelle is the ward of Sganarelle. While Ariste, quite untypical in this respect, wears his mantle of authority lightly, Sganarelle uses his power to the limit, almost succeeding in the utmost expression of egocentricity: forcing a girl to marry him aginst her will. Ariste, as an embryonic raisonneur, is a man of the world who understands that the way to treat other people is not to subjugate them, but to let them do as they wish. He gives Léonor a free rein, knowing that this is the only way to retain her affection; at the end of the play, he is about to marry her, despite the considerable difference in age between them. Thus Léonor turns towards Ariste, while Isabelle, resenting the heavy hand of Sganarelle, detests her guardian and regards him as a gaoler.

Sganarelle does not love Isabelle in any meaningful sense of the word: he intends to marry her for egotistical reasons best known to himself. As for Isabelle's attitude to this marriage, he does not care, seeing her only as an adjunct to his own personality. Isabelle, of course, is not happy with such a situation, and seeks to escape from Sganarelle into the arms of Valère. Here is a basic opposition: the Comic Hero will not hesitate to bend others to his wishes, whereas the Young People want only satisfaction for themselves and freedom to choose their own style of life. It is not easy to set up an opposition between the natural and the unnatural here, since Isabelle's behaviour is not always praiseworthy. The play has strong traces of the medieval farce, in which a stupid husband is outwitted by a shrewish wife, neither of them being particularly admirable characters. Isabelle is too worldly to be considered in the same light as the pure Agnès of L'École des Femmes; but the fact remains that if she is not entirely a lady, she is forced to this by the totally ungentlemanlike behaviour of Sganarelle.

We spoke above of the strength of the Young People's affection for each other; in certain cases, as in L'École des Maris, this affection is bestowed on a person whom the heroine scarcely knows. We cannot speak here of instinctive passion such as is displayed by Agnès in L'École des Femmes, for Isabelle is a very different person from that pure girl. However, the fact that Isabelle marries Valère at the end indicates that her relationship with him is based on more than the simple desire to escape from Sganarelle. She throws herself upon his good faith, despite the fact that she does not even speak to him until Act II Sc. ix of the play. As Valère observes towards the beginning:

> depuis quatre mois que je l'aime ardemment,
> Je n'ai pour lui parler pu trouver un moment
> (I, iv, 337-338)

The two Young People have been quite unable to communicate, though they have at least been aware of each other for four months. It is Isabelle who takes the bold step of initiating contact with Valère, by sending Sganarelle on a series of errands to him. After a few preliminary contacts through the latter, she goes so far as to suggest elopement to Valère. As she observes:

> Je fais, pour une fille, un projet bien hardi.
> (II, i, 366)

Molière is careful to underline the innocence of Isabelle's intentions and the quality of her emotion:

> ISABELLE
> O Ciel! sois-moi propice et seconde en ce jour
> Le stratagème adroit d'un innocent amour.
> (II, i, 361-362)

Later, in her first confrontation with Valère (II, ix), she speaks of her "estime" and "tendresse" for him, the "allégresse" which he inspires in her, and the fact that she already regards him as her "époux." Such instinctive faith in an unknown individual contrasts very strongly with the type of emotion displayed by Sganarelle, who has no confidence whatsoever in Isabelle and seeks to extinguish her individuality altogether. To Sganarelle, who prides himself on his masculine role as the subjugator, Isabelle's action in contacting Valère would be unthinkable. Yet it is her boldness which brings her success, for Sganarelle sees her as the passive instrument of his will and thus follows his own erroneous interpretation of the relationship between her and Valère. Strength of affection, mutual trust, and awareness of their situation thus enable the Young People to overcome the Comic Hero's authority.

The theme of society is brought out quite strongly in L'École des Maris, chiefly in the contrast between Ariste's treatment of Léonor and Sganarelle's treatment of Isabelle. We have discussed this in our introduction to the present chapter. The importance of this theme may be summarised by saying that the Young People love society, contact with other people, entertainment, fine clothes. The Comic Hero abhors all this, setting up his own ego as the standard by which the world is to be judged, and refusing to recognise anything which requires him to adapt or which threatens his supremacy in any way.

Finally, let us mention the question of Sganarelle's sufferings. As we have suggested, the Comic Hero brings his sufferings upon himself. The Young People are the proximate cause, but the blame for anything unpleasant that happens is not to be imputed primarily to them. This is certainly true of L'École des Maris, where Sganarelle obviously invites disaster by his conduct throughout the play. Any reasonable person would be perfectly well aware of what Isabelle is doing; only

Sganarelle, in his solitary solipsistic world, fails to realise the consequences of his actions. At the end, when confronted with undeniable proof that Isabelle has abandoned him for Valère, he exclaims:

> je ne pense pas que Satan en personne
> Puisse être si méchant qu'une telle friponne.
> J'aurais pour elle au feu mis la main que voilà:
> Malheureux qui se fie à femme après cela!
> (III, ix, 1103-1106)

Thus he actually believes himself to have been acting in Isabelle's best interests, and to have been ready to make sacrifices for her. He quite erroneously imputes malicious intentions to Isabelle, who as we have seen had no desire to wound him, and wished only to escape from his domination. This is clear from the words she uses at the end of the play, when her stratagem has been discovered. She asks Léonor to pardon her for using a "honteux stratagème," and continues by addressing Sganarelle in these words:

> Pour vous, je ne veux point, Monsieur, vous faire excuse:
> Je vous sers beaucoup plus que je ne vous abuse.
> (III, ix, 1083-1084)

Not only is the Comic Hero precisely the one who acts with malicious (i.e. egotistic) intentions; he is so self-centred that he remains unaware of this, and imputes his own intentions to the rest of the world.

The basic opposition between Young People and Comic Hero in L'École des Femmes is quite familiar. Agnès, the daughter of a poor peasant woman from whom Arnolphe took her, has been brought up by him "dans un petit couvent, loin de toute pratique" (I, i, 135). His intention in this is, of course, egotistical: he is obsessed with the idea of avoiding cuckoldry, and wishes to preserve Agnès in her purity far from all contact with the world, so that no thought of deceiving him will ever enter her mind. Agnès submits to all

this in her simplicity, without even finding her life tedious. In answer to a question from Arnolphe, she says "Jamais je ne m'ennuie." (II, v, 464). While this is a testimony to the purity of nature which Molière is depicting for us here, it also shows Agnès to be entirely without malice. Not only does she not feel herself ill-treated, she does not even wish for anything different from the rather unsatisfactory life which she is leading. She never complains of Arnolphe's treatment of her, which if not cruel is certainly unfeeling and lacks any consideration for her as a human being. We may mention Act III Sc. iii, in which Arnolphe has the girl read from the humiliating Maximes du Mariage. While the Comic Hero sits in a haze of self-satisfaction listening to this harsh and obscurantist work, Agnès reads on uncomplainingly, indeed without comment. She accepts tacitly, by her failure to protest, a philosophy of marriage which reduces her to the status of a household article, completely and utterly denying her human individuality.

The introduction of love, however, changes the situation. When Agnès meets Horace, she realises that an essential element has been missing from her life, and from this moment she pursues her emotion with a frantic and overpowering passion. She still has no desire to injure Arnolphe; she wishes only to claim her own liberty. If this is denied her, she does not even wish to live, as we may see in these words spoken by a servant after Arnolphe has confined Agnès to her room:

> Monsieur, si vous n'êtes auprès,
> Nous aurons de la peine à retenir Agnès;
> Elle veut à tous coups s'échapper, et peut-être
> Qu'elle se pourrait bien jeter par la fenêtre
> (V, viii, 1706-1710)

The force of passion in Agnès is incomparably greater than in Arnolphe because it represents to her the culmination of her existence as an individual. To Arnolphe, love is a method of imprisoning another human being, a technique for protecting his ego against the humiliation of cuckoldry. Thus he feels no real pleasure in love, for it exposes him to danger insofar as Agnès may deceive him with another. To the young girl, on the other hand, love is the most pleasant and natural thing in the world:

> C'est une chose, hélas! si plaisante et si douce!
> (II, v, 603)

> Le moyen de chasser ce qui fait du plaisir?
> (V, iv, 1527)

Such is the way in which "la pure nature" experiences love.

Agnès in her relationship with Horace is full of trust and self-abandonment. She is perfectly willing to submit herself to another person whom she loves, for her emotion makes Horace at least as important to her as she is to herself. This contrasts strongly with the attitude of Arnolphe, who wishes to dominate in any emotional relationship lest his fate should depend on the actions of another. Agnès abandons herself without the slightest concern to her affection for Horace. So pleasant is her emotion and so complete her trust in Horace that she is prepared to gratify his every wish, as we see in this exchange:

> ARNOLPHE
> N'a-t-il point exigé de vous d'autre remède?
>
> AGNES
> Non. Vous pouvez juger, s'il en eût demandé,
> Que pour le secourir j'aurais tout accordé.
> (II, v, 584-586)

Even after Arnolphe has attempted to sow seeds of suspicion in her

mind as to the character of young men, she writes to Horace in her celebrated letter:

> On me dit fort que tous les jeunes hommes sont des trompeurs...; mais je vous assure que je n'ai pu encore me figurer cela de vous, et je suis si touchée de vos paroles, que je ne saurais croire qu'elles soient menteuses.
> (III, iv)

Here is an opportunity for seduction which would have overjoyed a Don Juan; yet Horace is scrupulous in the highest degree. It is significant that Agnès' trust and guilelessness call forth the same reaction in this other Young Person. Horace intends only to marry Agnès, and reflects on her situation in these remarkable words to Arnolphe:

> Considérez un peu, par ce trait d'innocence,
> Où l'expose d'un fou la haute impertinence,
> Et quels fâcheux périls elle pourrait courir,
> Si j'étais maintenant homme à la moins chérir.
> Mais d'un trop pur amour mon âme est embrasée;
> J'aimerais mieux mourir que l'avoir abusée.
> (v, ii, 1412-1417)

Here we have the situation in a nutshell: the supposed love of Arnolphe for Agnès, being in fact egocentric and unnatural, tends only to be hurtful to her, while Horace's emotion, firmly rooted in nature, leads him only to seek her well-being. We may add that this speech is also highly comic, since the person whom Horace criticises so strongly by implication is no other than the man to whom he is speaking: Arnolphe.

The theme of society is more important in L'École des Femmes than in any other Molière play, except perhaps Le Misanthrope. Arnolphe's entire plan for avoiding cuckoldry rests on the sequestration of Agnès from society.

He and Chrysalde imply that it is precisely this deprivation which has reduced Agnès to the state of being "une sotte" or "une bête," as they describe her in I, i. Arnolphe has put her into a country house where he receives no visitors, and has given her only two simple-minded servants so as not to "gâter sa bonté naturelle." He speaks contemptuously of what happens in society, where the circulation of individuals makes it possible for a woman to conceal her affairs, or even for the husband to become blasé and accept her lovers. He jokes about men whose wives have salons where they receive aristocrats and wits, and where the husband is reduced to the position of "mari de Madame." Thus we may see that society represents to Arnolphe an opportunity for Agnès to develop her personality, and perhaps eventually to challenge his superiority, which is exactly what he does not want. Agnès, on the other hand, though she never actually enjoys the benefits of society, becomes aware of what she has missed, and begins to realise its value. It is clear that she will no longer be deprived of what in the world of Molière is an essential element of life:

> Croit-on que je me flatte, et qu'enfin, dans ma tête,
> Je ne juge pas bien que je suis une bête?
> Moi-même, j'en ai honte; et, dans l'âge où je suis,
> Je ne veux plus passer pour sotte, si je puis.
> (V, iv, 1556-1559)

When once the Young People begin to speak in these terms, it is evident that the dominance of the Comic Hero will soon be overthrown.

In L'Avare there is again a powerful opposition between Young People and Comic Hero. Here, we have a double example of inhumanity on the part of the Comic Hero: Harpagon is both miser and egotist. As miser, he wishes to marry his daughter Élise to a certain seigneur Anselme, a man much older than her,

but rich enough to be willing to accept her "sans dot." As miser again, he keeps his son Cléante on such a shamefully small allowance that the latter is forced to have recourse to money-lenders (including, of course, his own father). As egotist, he wishes to marry Mariane, a girl much younger than himself, and for whose hand he does not hesitate to vie with his own son.

Here, clearly, is a play in which the opposition of personalities must be violent. The atmosphere of meanness and unworthiness generated by Harpagon pervades the entire work. It is especially notable in the character of Cléante, who has bitter quarrels with his father of a kind untypical of Molière's work as a whole.[2] The clashes between Cléante and his father are significant in showing us how the two differ, and thus giving us a clearer conception of the stark, inhuman nature of Harpagon himself. Thus the absurdity of Harpagon's passion for Mariane is rendered more enormous when we discover that he has his own son for a rival. It is unnatural for an old man to pursue a young girl, but how much more so if we see him side by side with a young man in such a pursuit. Yet Harpagon is utterly single-minded in this matter, as in every other: he betrays the obsessional nature of a fanatic. Thus in IV, v, having discovered that Cléante is not after all willing to renouce Mariane, he has a bitter exchange with his son, on which Robert Jouanny justly comments: "Cléante est le fils indigne d'un père avili."[3]

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[2]It is only in Tartuffe that we find a relationship between Comic Hero and Young People which is equally violent: Orgon and his son Damis react very strongly to each other, since they both have fiery temperaments. The question here is precisely one of temperament, however, since Damis, after the reconciliation, is as devoted to his father as he had previously been opposed to him. In L'Avare, Harpagon never really becomes human, so that his relationship with Cléante cannot be said to become close.

[3]Molière: Oeuvres, ed. Robert Jouanny (Paris: Garnier, 1962), vol. II, p. 898, note 1371.

In a previous scene, indeed, Harpagon is on the point of descending to physical violence - a typical reaction of the Molièresque Comic Hero, but one which seems extreme in the case of one's own son:

HARPAGON
Tu renonceras à Mariane.

CLEANTE
Point du tout.

HARPAGON
Donnez-moi un bâton tout à l'heure.
(IV, iii)

Cléante also has the misfortune of experiencing Harpagon's most unworthy display of avarice. If we had any doubts about the old man's love of money, they would vanish after we have seen the state of penury to which he reduces his son, and the terms on which he seeks to lend money.[4] Cléante brings out the same aspect of his father's character in III, vii, where he offers a splendid collation to Mariane and then gives her Harpagon's fine diamond ring. The miser is trapped by his son's ruse, suffering agonies between his avarice and the hypocritical desire not to appear mean in front of Mariane.

We may briefly mention Cléante's taste for society, in which he is a typical Young Person and contrasts in typical fashion with the Comic Hero. Cléante is short of money, and so cannot make as good a showing as he would no doubt like to. However, he exists by borrowing, and is thus enabled to support a style of life which leads Harpagon to make this denunciation:

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[4] cf. the famous scene (II, i) in which Cléante is offered such items as "une peau de lézard...remplie de foin" and "un luth de Bologne, garni de toutes ses cordes, ou peu s'en faut," to make up his 15,000 francs.

> Est-il rien de plus scandaleux que ce somptueux équipage que vous promenez par la ville...pour aller ainsi vêtu, il faut que vous me dérobiez.
> (I, iv)

Evidently, Cléante is prepared to go to some lengths in order to enjoy the social life to which he is naturally attracted.

Cléante provides the clearest contrast in terms of character to his father. The other Young People in L'Avare are important not so much because of their character as because of the dramatic opposition which exists between them and the Comic Hero. This opposition, we feel, is most clearly seen in the context of the love-plot, which pits Young People and Comic Hero against each other in a struggle to achieve conflicting aims. We will now proceed to examine the dynamics of the love-plot in Molière; before beginning a detailed discussion of our three plays, we will make some general observations.

The love-plot is almost universally employed in Molière's comedies.[5] Yet it is traditional, predictable, and in no sense betrays any unusual talent on the part of the author. It has been, indeed, since classical times, the obvious framework on which to hang a series of comical incidents culminating in a happy ending. In the commedia dell'arte tradition which strongly influenced Molière, there is a proliferation of jeunes premiers, all important in the conduct of the plot, but all, unfortunately, relatively colourless and

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[5] Of the nine plays treated in this thesis, the love-plot plays an important part in L'Étourdi, Tartuffe, and L'Avare; an essential one (leading up to the final masquerade) in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme and Le Malade Imaginaire; and constitutes the entire action in L'École des Maris and L'École des Femmes.

lacking in anything beyond purely conventional interest. Molière adopts this tradition: his young lovers are, with few exceptions, stereotypes whose emotions are predictably repeated from one play to the next and whose amorous convolutions lead inevitably to their final happy union. It is certainly not in Molière's plots, or in his typical young lover, that we should seek his originality. Yet Molière is a great and original writer: so we may expect that even in the most traditional, most stereotyped area of his creation, there may be found something new and peculiar to him alone. Such is, in fact, the case.

Molière is not really interested in plot: he is no Scribe or Augier. He seeks rather to delineate a particular type of character, which reveals itself in a series of sketches, each of which shows a different aspect of that character. A plot implies progress in time; but Molière's Comic Heroes do not progress - they remain true to themselves, eternally the same. Instead of letting them change before us, therefore, he revolves them in a kind of magic lantern show which lets us see various aspects of something that is essentially static. Thus the plot of a Molière play is simply an excuse, a first impetus for the evolution of a complex theatrical entity which far surpasses the plot itself in significance and interest.

Thus the idea of plot as linear progression or series of interdependent incidents is something which Molière neglects as far as is practicable. However, there is another aspect of the plot which he does utilise: the idea of plot as an expression of dramatic conflict. In the plays with which we deal here, the dramatic conflict lies principally in the clash between the egotistic Comic Hero and the other groups of characters. It is in the relationship between Young People and Comic Hero that this clash appears at its most powerful, because it

is the Young People who are most subject to the expression of the Comic Hero's egotism. He has financial, legal, or moral power over them, and is thus able to frustrate them in the thing which most nearly concerns them: their romantic attachments. Thus the plot of such a play - depicting the struggles of the Young People to free themselves from his domination - demonstrates to us the strength of the Comic Hero's obsession. Were he unselfish, content to leave them to work out their own destiny, there would be no plot at all. For this reason, therefore, we suggest that the apparent banality of Molière's plots is to be reconsidered under two aspects: firstly, the repeated and desperate struggle of these Young People reminds us of the unvarying egotism of Molière's Comic Heroes: such is their basic nature, and it never changes. Secondly, the commonplace nature of the plot (and, in many cases, of the young people themselves) serves to heighten and accentuate the individuality of the Comic Hero, who is the nucleus, the dominating person, in each work.

In short, we suggest the following interpretation of a Molièresque plot: the Young People begin the play in an adverse position, insofar as their desires are frustrated by the Comic Hero's <u>force majeure</u>; they struggle throughout the work to overcome this obstacle; they end victorious and united. The Comic Hero himself follows the opposite trajectory: from a position of power to one of defeat. In other words, the Young People show us the progression of the Comic Hero, his self-expression in the play's action and the consequences of this, as no other group of characters does. It is from this point of view that we have given our present chapter the subtitle The Comic Hero in Action. We have examined above the ways in which the Comic Hero seeks to force the Young People to do what he wants; equally important is the way in which he is gradually and inevitably deprived of his power and forced to allow the Young People their freedom.

The egotistic drive of the Comic Hero, as we have often suggested, carries with it a consequent blindness to all but his own interests. This blindness is evident also in the many tricks and schemes which the Young People employ to circumvent him. Though less active than the Servants, the Young People are repeatedly contrasted with the Comic Hero in a manner which makes the blindness of the latter perfectly plain.

Thus in L'École des Maris Isabelle employs Sganarelle in the most paradoxical fashion: as the messenger between her and Valère. Here is the Comic Hero fooled by a powerless girl into doing the exact opposite of what he so vehemently desires. In II, iv he even carries a letter from her to Valère, after she has instructed him on no account to open it. In II, ix the lovers meet in front of him and exchange a whole series of doubles-entendres (a situation repeated in several other plays) which pass right over his head; indeed, he ends by embracing Valère in an access of pity for the young man! Such scenes rest on the assumption that Sganarelle is incapable of seeing any but his own interpretation of the situation; even more daring is the scene (I, iii) in which Valère speaks to Sganarelle several times, receives no answer, and is finally reduced to slapping him with his hat. Nowhere else in the work is there so striking a symbol of Sganarelle's closed psychology.

In L'École des Femmes, Horace and Agnès succeed in circumventing Arnolphe despite two apparently crushing disadvantages: the complete helplessness of Agnès and the fact that Horace reveals everything to Arnolphe in his ignorance of the latter's identity. Forewarned is forearmed; yet Arnolphe cannot withstand the force of an affection that sweeps him and every other obstacle out of the way. He himself is surprised by this:

Coup sur coup je verrai, par leur intelligence,
De mes soins vigilants confondre la prudence?
Et je serai la dupe, en ma maturité,
D'une jeune innocente et d'un jeune éventé?
(IV, vii, 1184-1187)

While far from being as blind as Sganarelle, Arnolphe is evidently faced with a situation that, try as he may, he cannot control. He is trapped between two opposing forces: his obsession with avoiding cuckoldry, which makes him cling to Agnès, and the impetuous strength of the young people's affection. Seeing him helpless, and knowing this to be his own fault, we are reminded that in Molière the egocentric works towards the defeat of his own purposes.

Cléante of L'Avare has a similar function in revealing to us the Comic Hero's blindness. In III, vii Cléante and Mariane meet in front of Harpagon and exchange a series of doubles-entendres which the old man is very slow to recognise. Cléante begins by telling Mariane that he has no desire for her to become his mother-in-law, the real reason being of course that he wishes to marry her himself. Mariane catches this, and replies that she does not wish for such a relationship; whereupon Harpagon, misunderstanding everything, exclaims: "Elle a raison; à sot compliment, il faut une réponse de même." Here we see the typical blindness of the Comic Hero: interpreting the situation only from his point of view, he is unconscious of what is really happening. On the same failing of Harpagon's are grounded the ridiculous misunderstandings of V, iii, in which the miser accuses Valère of stealing his cassette. The latter believes Harpagon to be speaking of Élise, and refers to her in the most obvious terms:

VALÈRE
Tous mes désirs se sont bornés à jouir de sa vue; et rien de criminel n'a profané la passion que ses beaux yeux m'ont inspirée.

HARPAGON
Les beaux yeux de ma cassette! Il parle d'elle comme un amant d'une maîtresse.

Here is the quintessence of the Comic Hero: to actually state a truth while erroneously imposing a false interpretation upon it. At the end of the play, however, the confusion between cassette and mistress is resolved with ease, once Harpagon sees that he must take either one or the other: he gladly yields the girl in order to keep the money.

As a final example of this blindness of the Comic Hero, we may cite the case of Valère. This young man, being in love with Harpagon's daughter Élise, infiltrates himself into the miser's household and reaches the position of Intendant. This he accomplishes chiefly by agreeing with everything that Harpagon proposes, and even outdoing him in avarice. His technique is this:

> j'éprouve que pour gagner les hommes, il n'est point de meilleure voie que de se parer à leurs yeux de leurs inclinations, que de donner dans leurs maximes, encenser leurs defauts, et applaudir à ce qu'ils font. (I, i)

It is strange, nevertheless, that a man as businesslike in other respects as Harpagon should allow himself to be fooled in this way. Maître Jacques, for example, sees through Valère and resents his flattery of Harpagon (III, i); but so far is Harpagon from this perspicacity that he actually gives Valère custody of Elise after a particularly impressive piece of hypocrisy on the young man's part (Harpagon to Elise, I, v: "Je lui donne l'autorité que le ciel me donne sur toi, et j'entends que tu fasses tout ce qu'il te dira."). The significance of such a scene is clear: Harpagon is so obsessed by his own plans that he begins to work against them. Such is the psychology of the Comic Hero: completely wrapped up in himself, he ends by defeating his own purposes.

Conclusion

We have now analysed certain Young People in Molière from two points of view: the character contrast which they provide with the Comic Hero, and the way in which the two groups are opposed through the plot. Our general theme has been that both the plot and the Young People's character tends towards the conventional, and that they are therefore to be examined not so much in themselves as in their revelatory function with regard to the Comic Hero. They show us the latter's singlemindedness in pursuing his own desires even when this means doing violence to the most intimate wishes of others; at the same time, they show his weakness either by playing tricks on him or by putting him in awkward situations from which he cannot escape. This typically ambivalent mixture of strength and weakness is also to be found in the view which the raisonneurs afford us of the Comic Hero.

Chapter VI: The Raisonneurs: The Comic Hero as Philosopher

Under this heading we will discuss four main characters: Chrysalde of L'École des Femmes, Cléante of Tartuffe, Philinte of Le Misanthrope, and Béralde of Le Malade Imaginaire; we will also include Ariste of L'École des Maris, who is not normally considered one of the raisonneurs, but who bears a strong resemblance to them and therefore may be discussed in the same terms.

The raisonneurs form probably the best-known group of characters in Molière. This is due principally to the fact that they have been taken as representing Molière's own point of view in his works; however, we will not attempt to discuss this rather involved question here. Suffice it to say that we see the raisonneurs in the organic and dramatic role which they play in the context of each work. We do not see them as presenting Molière's own philosophy, but rather as propounding a point of view which clashes directly with that of the Comic Hero.[1] In this way, they contribute another element to our understanding of the central character of our chosen plays. By replacing the raisonneur within the context of the play, we are led to ask what is his function in this limited area. At this stage it becomes clear that he provides the strongest contrast in terms of reasoned and clearly-expressed philosophy with the statements of the Comic Hero himself.

While the Young People suffer under the dominance of the Comic Hero in the plot, and the Wives provide a character contrast with him, the raisonneurs

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[1] The raisonneurs are not the only group to oppose the Comic Hero in verbal argument. The Wives and Servants also discuss with him; but it is the raisonneurs who elicit the clearest and most cohesive verbal reactions from him.

conflict with him chiefly in verbal terms. By discussing the theme of the work with him, by presenting a reasoned and carefully-expressed attitude to this theme and to the world in general, the raisonneurs draw the Comic Hero out into a series of more or less philosophical statements and also, inevitably, into a personal reaction which is usually of a violent nature. Thus they show us an aspect of the Hero's nature which complements what we discover in his relationships with the other groups.

Before proceeding to an analysis of individual cases of this kind, we must enumerate the characteristics of the raisonneur insofar as these are useful in providing a contrast or comparison with the Comic Hero. First is that feature which automatically comes to mind in connection with him: his recommendation of moderation and the avoidance of excess. While every raisonneur voices opinions of this nature, it is Philinte of Le Misanthrope who gives them their most lapidary expression:

> La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité
> Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété.
> (I, i, 151-152)

Secondly, these men practise what they preach: in their good-natured equanimity they provide a further contrast with the Comic Hero. The latter is notable for the excesses of behaviour in which he constantly indulges, and the raisonneur provides a kind of norm by which we can judge the extent of the Comic Hero's aberrations. We may cite the case of Ariste in the École des Maris. He is treated in the rudest manner by his brother Sganarelle, but never descends to the use of the same tactics in his replies:

> SGANARELLE
> Allez, vous êtes un vieux fou...

ARISTE
Je veux m'abandonner à la foi de ma femme,
Et prétends toujours vivre ainsi que j'ai vécu.

SGANARELLE
Que j'aurai de plaisir si l'on le fait cocu!

ARISTE
J'ignore pour quel sort mon astre m'a fait naître;
Mais je sais que pour vous, si vous manquez de l'être,
On ne vous en doit point imputer le défaut,
Car vos soins pour cela font bien tout ce qu'il faut.

SGANARELLE
Riez donc, beau rieur. Oh! que cela doit plaire
De voir un goguenard presque sexagénaire!
(I, iii, 230-240)

To moderation we may add tolerance and forbearance, two moral qualities in which the Comic Hero is singularly lacking. In L'École des Maris, for example, Ariste and Sganarelle behave in entirely different fashions towards their wards, Léonor and Isabelle. Ariste (I, ii) speaks of his "grande tendresse" for Léonor and says that if youth has faults, one must "reprendre ses défauts avec grande douceur"; despite his affection for Léonor, he is prepared to see her marry someone else if she wishes. At the end of the play, believing on the strength of Sganarelle's testimony that she has deceived him to marry Valère, he addresses only the mildest of reproaches to her:

Léonor, sans courroux, j'ai sujet de me plaindre...
(III, viii, 1055)

How different from the gaoler-like behaviour of his brother!

Tolerance is a virtue which facilitates social intercourse: and the Molièresque raisonneur is above all a man of society. He is in fact the honnête homme of the 17th century, the man who moves easily in social groups, neither imposing himself on others nor expecting their behaviour to conform to any

particular standard.[2] In this, of course, he provides a glaring contrast with the Comic Hero, who is solitary and egotistic and wishes everyone else to do exactly what he wants. Le Misanthrope provides the best example of this: its essential theme is that the nature of society will not permit the honesty which, in a perfect world, would no doubt be the ideal. The individual must not set himself up as superior to the group:

> c'est une folie à nulle autre seconde
> De vouloir se mêler de corriger le monde.
> (I, i, 157-158)

Finally, we should mention the perspicacity of the raisonneurs, for they are able either to see what is unwise in the Comic Hero's conduct, or to forecast the unfortunate consequences thereof. In this again, they form an evident contrast with the Comic Hero, who in the egocentric pursuit of his own desires is blinded to the realities of his situation. Thus Cléante sees through Tartuffe and attempts to give Orgon the same insight:

> Hé quoi? Vous ne ferez nulle distinction
> Entre l'hypocrisie et la dévotion?
> Vous les voulez traiter d'un semblable langage
> Et rendre même honneur au masque qu'au visage?
> (I, v, 331-334)

Such is the character of the raisonneur, insofar as it helps us to better understand the nature of the Comic Hero. For our present purposes, no other

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[2] In this connection we may recall that the four raisonneurs who appear in a play containing Young People (Ariste, Chrysalde, Cléante and Béralde) all seek to aid the latter in their wishes, whereas the Comic Hero in each play (Sganarelle, Arnolphe, Orgon, Argan), constantly attempts to constrain the Young People to his own desires.

aspect of the raisonneur's activity is particularly significant. Unlike the Servants, the raisonneurs play little part in the plot.[3] As to the comic element of the plays, the raisonneurs contribute little or nothing. Individuals so lacking in egotism and self-consciousness could scarcely be made a butt of comic emotion; after all, one of the primary preoccupations of the honnête homme must have been to avoid any imputation of ridicule. Here again, we suggest that the absence of a certain quality in them serves to reveal its presence in the Comic Hero: side by side with so reasonable a man, the Comic Hero appears even more ridiculous to us.

To conclude: we have spoken of the philosophy of the raisonneur - the avoidance of excess (usually with reference to particular cases), and their own equanimity of temper; of their kindness and understanding, their acceptance of society and the individuality of others. We have seen that they are men of the world endowed with intelligence and perspicacity. Thus they are well-defined in character, better so perhaps than the Servants, Wives, or Young People; certainly, their personalities provide a very clear contrast with that of the Comic Hero. This contrast is accentuated by the closeness of their relationship with him: Béralde and Argan are brothers to the Comic Hero, Cléante a brother-in-law, Chrysalde and Philinte friends, but obviously close friends. They are not

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[3] Ariste and Chrysalde have no role whatsoever in the plot; Cléante and Béralde intervene on behalf of the Young People, but without resorting to any direct action; Philinte is perhaps the most involved, since he loves and intends to marry Éliante. This last detail is untypical, since the raisonneur, as a disinterested spectator and commentator, nowhere else allows himself to become emotionally entangled. It may perhaps be cited as an example of Philinte's essential humility and lack of egotism, for he has no hesitation in accepting a woman who apparently loves Alceste and has been rejected by him in favour of Célimène.

comic in themselves, but serve rather to give relief to the comic nature of the central character. They provide a standard of reason and normality which reveals to us the extent to which the Comic Hero is unreasonable and abnormal. Furthermore, for the audience of Molière's day they must have incarnated the honnête homme, and as such must have set off with great emphasis the solitary bourgeois bearishness of the Comic Hero. They answer well to La Rochefoucauld's celebrated definition of the honnête homme: "celui qui ne se pique de rien." In a sense, the Molièresque Comic Hero is the man of ultimate egotism, "celui qui se pique de lui-même." His egotism is founded not on a particular attribute, but on the fact of being himself. One thinks of Alceste's words: "Je veux qu'on me distingue." To a 17th century audience, the honnête homme would have incarnated the opposite ideal: that of integrating oneself into the social group. Thus in his original setting the raisonneur must have provided a yet greater contrast with the Comic Hero; and so the latter must have appeared yet more comic.

Revelatory Function

In our chapter on the Servants, we discussed a particular type of scene, to which we gave the name of "Altercation Scene." Such scenes, we suggested, revealed to the audience important elements of the Comic Hero's character, and contained most of what is essential in the revelatory function of the female servants. The case of the raisonneurs is similar; in several instances, there is a kind of exposition scene in which they discuss and to some extent conflict with the Comic Hero. These exposition scenes are essential in the revelatory function of the raisonneur; we feel that a few general observations about them would be of value here.

In classical French theatre, the first scene or two usually forms what is known as the exposition. Here we are introduced to the situation obtaining

at the beginning of the work and to the characters who are to play a role in it, so that we are prepared for what is to happen in the rest of the work. Such an exposition is to be found in Molière's comedies also, particularly in the five plays which feature raisonneurs. Only in Le Malade Imaginaire is the raisonneur not introduced until late in the play. L'École des Maris, L'École des Femmes and Le Misanthrope all begin with a discussion between Comic Hero and raisonneur in which the character of the former is revealed, and the theme of the play brought out. In Tartuffe, the exposition is masterfully organic, taking the form of a dispute between Mme Pernelle and the other members of the family; thus there is no need here for the raisonneur as such, though he appears in his capacity as a member of the family. Nevertheless, there soon follows a major scene between Cléante and Orgon (I, v), which is of great significance for revelation of plot, theme, and character. Of our five raisonneurs, only Béralde of Le Malade Imaginaire is not introduced until the play is well on its way: thus we may conclude that the raisonneur fulfils a definite dramatic function in providing the audience with an introduction to the Comic Hero and the theme of the play.

It is revealing to compare the exposition of a Molière play with that of a typical tragedy of the same period. In the latter, we are presented essentially with the situation which exists at the beginning of the plot. Since the action is to take place in 24 hours and in one physical area, every detail must be explained to us so that motives will be clear and unity of action will be preserved. It is in fact the plot which is of paramount importance in the exposition of a tragedy. In Molière, the case is somewhat different. Here, as we have attempted to show, the plot is conventional, repetitious, and consequently of minor importance. We have tried to present plot in Molière as the revelation of different aspects of a central character through a series of "variations" in which he

confronts various groups of other characters. The idea of character revelation is what holds a Molière play together. Thus we should not be surprised to see that the exposition of such a play reveals to us not situation and plot, but rather the character of the Comic Hero and the particular vice from which he suffers in each work. Where a raisonneur is involved, this is certainly the case - the introductory scene is a combination of character revelation and the disclosure of the play's theme.

Let us now discuss examples of this type of exposition in our chosen plays. The first two scenes of L'École des Maris contain just this kind of revelation. To begin with Ariste: he constantly refers to society, both as a standard by which the individual must regulate his conduct, and indeed as the final arbiter of what is right. He warns Sganarelle that one must not oppose the majority:

> Toujours au plus grand nombre on doit s'accommoder
> (I, i, 41)

He goes even further: not only must one accommodate society, one should not even oppose it in what one believes to be right:

> il vaut vieux souffrir d'être au nombre des fous,
> Que du sage parti se voir seul contre tous.
> (Ibid., 53-54)

Such observations serve to heighten for us the solitary egocentricity of Sganarelle.[4]

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[4]The contrast between Sganarelle and Ariste is made abundantly clear, to the point that Ariste's defense of fashion goes beyond what Molière himself might have wished to say. It is not our intention here to discuss whether the raisonneur is right in his opinions: Ariste perhaps goes too far in his submission to the judgments of society. The same criticism might be made of Philinte in Le Misanthrope. The important point is that Molière seeks to oppose raisonneur and Comic Hero in order to bring out the character of the latter.

Ariste recommends that one should follow the prevailing fashion, but only in moderation ("l'un et l'autre excès choque," v. 43); he feels that the young should be allowed their freedom, and that the way to ensure affection from a girl is not to lock her up, but to win her heart ("Je trouve que le coeur est ce qu'il faut gagner," v. 174). As far as Léonor is concerned, he wishes nothing better than for her to indulge her own desires; if these lead her away from him, then he will accept the situation as it is. He remarks in I, ii:

> mon dessein n'est pas de la tyranniser.
> Je sais bien que nos ans ne se rapportent guère,
> Et je laisse à son choix liberté toute entière.
> (198-200)

We shall see how this contrasts with the busy egocentricity of Sganarelle.

Sganarelle of course differs in every point from Ariste. He is wilful and self-centred ("J'ai pour tout conseil ma fantaisie à suivre," v. 7); he intends to keep Isabelle in a state of subjection ("Je prétends corps pour corps pouvoir répondre d'elle," v. 128); he inveighs against social intercourse and fashion. His words on the latter subject especially reveal him to be traditionally-minded (unwilling to change his opinions) and ridiculously preoccupied with his physical well-being (incapable of seeing anything beyond that which affects his own circumscribed world). All this is evident in a short sequence of verses where he declares that he wants:

> Un beau pourpoint bien long et fermé comme il faut,
> Qui, pour bien digérer, tienne l'estomac chaud;
> Un haut-de-chausses fait justement pour ma cuisse;
> Des souliers où mes pieds ne soient point au supplice.
> Ainsi qu'en ont usé sagement nos aieux:
> Et qui me trouve mal, n'a qu'a fermer les yeux.
> (I, i, 69-74)

Finally, in contrast to Ariste's moderation and politeness, Sganarelle is rude and mocking. Already in v. 9 he speaks of "des fous comme vous, mon frère"; in v. 230, his opinion has not changed - "Allez, vous êtes un vieux fou"; he constantly makes fun of Ariste's age; he does not hesitate to announce loudly:

> Que j'aurai de plaisir si l'on le fait cocu!
> (I, ii, 234)

Significant here is the fact that this reaction is aroused by Ariste's opposition to his views: the raisonneur, who states his point of view without any malicious intention, provokes a quite unmerited onslaught of anger and abuse. Thus Ariste advises Sganarelle to let the girls go out:

> ARISTE
> Eh! laissez-les, mon frère, aller se divertir.
>
> SGANARELLE
> Je suis votre valet, mon frère.
>
> ARISTE
> La jeunesse
> Veut...
>
> SGANARELLE
> La jeunesse est sotte, et parfois la vieillesse.
> (I, ii, 90-92)

Similar exchanges occur several times in the first two scenes: thus we see here one of the most characteristic features of the Comic Hero: irrational anger brought about by the mere suggestion that there is more than one point of view on certain questions. Sganarelle's frustrated rage is accentuated for us by Ariste's equanimity.

Certain other information may be gleaned from these scenes. Thus the background of the plot is given to us by Sganarelle (vv. 99-108; the father of

the two girls committed them to the care of the two brothers on his deathbed); the theme - the upbringing of a young girl - is clearly brought out throughout sc. ii. We are shown the basic opposition existing between the Comic Hero, Sganarelle, and the other characters: Servants (Lisette), Young People (Isabelle and Léonor), and of course Raisonneur. Important though this information may be, however, the first two scenes remain significant for us because of the revelation of character which they afford us. It is remarkable that in the first scene we have no discussion of how to educate the young, but a series of general statements on general subjects: in other words, the expression of a broad character difference between raisonneur and Comic Hero.

L'École des Femmes provides another good example of the exposition scene. We begin immediately with a discussion of the play's theme - cuckoldry - and the words of Chrysalde and Arnolphe on this subject tell us a good deal about their personalities. The raisonneur regards this misfortune thus:

> Ce sont coups du hasard, dont on n'est point garant,
> Et bien sot, ce me semble, est le soin qu'on en prend.[5]
> (I, i, 13-14)

Worse things can happen, he feels; but what he fears for Arnolphe is the mockery of hundreds of husbands whom Arnolphe himself has made fun of in the past. He warns the latter:

> s'il faut que sur vous on ait la moindre prise,
> Gare qu'aux carrefours on ne vous tympanise.
> (I, i, 71-72)

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[5]This advice may appear excessively worldly if taken in a general sense; but once again, we must stress that the raisonneur is to be considered in his relationship with the Comic Hero, not as an oracle whose words have abstract and general significance. Chrysalde is not saying that it is useless to attempt avoiding cuckoldry; he is saying that Arnolphe's attempts in this respect have gone so far as to appear silly.

Here we have two elements: a reasonable, worldly view of cuckoldry, which after all is not the worst of fates; and a reference, if only oblique, to the power of society as an influence on us. Chrysalde feels, essentially, that it is much worse to be laughed at as a cuckold than to actually be one; he is more conscious of the judgments of society than the private obsessions of an individual. Arnolphe's mistake has been to laugh at others, so now he is liable to suffer a similar fate:

> qui rit d'autrui
> Doit craindre qu'en revanche on rie aussi de lui.
> (I, i, 45)

The raisonneur's attitude towards society goes even further, however. He hears from Arnolphe that Agnès has been brought up in complete isolation, and following Arnolphe's lead, describes her as "une sotte" (v. 81), "une femme stupide" (v. 103), and "une bête" (vv. 107, 110). Clearly, it seems natural to him that a person educated in this way, without the benefits of society, will end up stupid and incapable. As to Agnès, he is of course wrong; but his attitude serves to accentuate for us the anti-social egocentricity of Arnolphe.

The above observations on Chrysalde will furnish a good introduction to the personality of Arnolphe, for in every material respect he has exactly the contrary opinion to the raisonneur. He is not impressed by Chrysalde's warning that he has mocked too many husbands: his only reply is to give a lengthy description of the varieties of cuckoldry ending:

> Enfin, ce sont partout des sujets de satire;
> Et comme spectateur ne puis-je pas en rire?
> (I, i, 43-44)

He will not be moved, for he believes that his own attitude is inevitably the correct one. When Chrysalde asks if he would be content with "une sotte," Arnolphe

replies:

> Tant, que j'aimerais mieux une laide bien sotte
> Qu'une femme fort belle avec beaucoup d'esprit.
> (I, i, 104-105)

We may see in all this the lengths to which Arnolphe will go in the service of his obsession. Indeed, he prides himself upon it (for a central self-assuredness is typical of Molière's Comic Heroes). He claims that it would be difficult to cuckold him:

> Bien huppé qui pourra m'attraper sur ce point.
> (Ibid., 74)

Lastly, when opposed in this, he turns to mockery or to categoric affirmation of his point of view. He makes cynical and insinuating references to Chrysalde's own wife (v. 83); when pressed further, he shows extreme obstinacy:

> Prêchez, patrocinez jusqu'à la Pentecôte;
> Vous serez ébahi, quand vous serez au bout,
> Que vous ne m'aurez rien persuadé du tout.
> (Ibid., 120-122)

But the final lines of this scene especially bear the mark of genius. Unable to reach agreement, the friends part, and Arnolphe naturally has the last word in these ineffable verses:

> Il est un peu blessé sur certaines matières.
> Chose étrange de voir comme avec passion
> Un chacun est chaussé de son opinion!
> (Ibid., 196-198)

Such an observation takes us immediately back to Sganarelle's belief in his own infallibility.

Arnolphe's attitude towards society as revealed in this scene is rather

complex. He rejects the idea of good company as dangerous for his wife's fidelity (vv. 85-102). He does not want a clever wife who would reduce him to the role of "mari de Madame." At the same time, Arnolphe is a social climber: he wishes to be addressed as M. de la Souche (v. 168). This simply shows him to be a typical bourgeois: incapable of appreciating the finer aspects of society (refined conversation, literary amusement), he seeks only the grosser pleasures such as that of having a fake title. In this, the raisonneur, being the honnête homme incarnate, must have made a very obvious contrast to the Comic Hero for a 17th century audience.

Finally, we may mention that the plot also is introduced here: Arnolphe is to be married tomorrow (v. 2), to a girl whom he bought from her mother at the age of four and brought up in "un petit convent, loin de toute pratique" (v. 175), to guarantee himself against cuckoldry. These details however occupy little space; what is essential in the exposition is the revelation of the play's theme, the depiction of the Comic Hero's obsession in this regard, and the character contrast between him and the raisonneur.

Le Misanthrope opens with a similar scene between Raisonneur and Comic Hero. Once again, it is the character of the Comic Hero which is being revealed to us, and in this respect we are plunged in medias res, for Alceste's first words are a series of intemperate exclamations. As early as v. 5, he gives a key to the understanding of his character: "Moi, je veux me fâcher, et ne veux point entendre." His language is violent and exaggerated when speaking of Philinte's complaisant politeness: "mourir de pure honte" (v. 14); "scandaliser" (v. 16); "indigne, lâche, infâme" (v.25); "pendre à l'instant" (v.28). He swears copiously: "Morbleu!" (vv. 25,60,109,180); "Têtebleu!" (v.141). He is obstinate and immovable in this

obstinacy:

> Est de rompre en visière à tout mon dessein le genre humain.
> (I, i. 95-96)

That he is anti-social is a point that we need hardly belabour: it must be mentioned if only to recall the importance of the theme of society for Molière's works, especially those works in which a raisonneur appears. Yet despite his sincere denunciation of the dishonesty of others, we may suspect that Alceste's hidden and probably unconscious motive, like that of Arnolphe or Sganarelle, is vanity; indeed, he almost involuntarily lets this slip:

> Je veux qu'on me distingue; et pour le trancher net,
> L'ami du genre humain n'est point du tout mon fait
> (Ibid., 63-64)

Why is he disgusted by society? Because it does not give him the special respect he feels entitled to.

Typical again is his rudeness when Philinte attempts to contradict his opinions:

> Moi, votre ami? Rayez cela de vos papiers.
> (Ibid., 8)

The theme of the play - society and social convention - is clearly brought out. Philinte's philosophy is based on the idea of reciprocity, of mutual civility. He believes that when greeted one should "payer de la même monnaie," "répondre [aux] empressements, "rendre offre pour offre" (vv. 38-40).[6]

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[6] cf. in the same scene, the gentle understanding with which he regards mankind in general: he speaks of men as "les pauvres mortels." Man's nature, he feels, is inevitably tainted with vice, but one must regard these failings with "douceur" and "vertu traitable."

Alceste objects to the idea of reducing everyone to the same level:

> Sur quelque préférence une estime se fonde,
> Et c'est n'estimer rien qu'estimer tout le monde.
> (I, i, 57-58)

Clearly, this has become an obsession with him, for he rejects any other possibility out of hand; in fact, his greatest pleasure is to prove that he is right, even when this injures his interests. Thus in the matter of his lawsuit:

> Je voudrais, m'en coutât-il grand'chose,
> Pour la beauté du fait avoir perdu ma cause.
> (Ibid., 201-202)

Thus are character and theme displayed for us in this exposition. Plot is also introduced: the procès is discussed, with some details on Alceste's opponent (vv. 124-140); and the matter of Célimène is brought up (v. 205 passim).

The exposition scenes above are in our opinion the most important and characteristic from the point of view of the raisonneur. We have seen how in each of these scenes similar themes are revealed to the audience: primarily, the character and obsession of the Comic Hero in himself and in relation to the raisonneur; in addition, the theme of the play and the details of the plot. We therefore receive considerable information in such a scene. In Tartuffe and Le Malade Imaginaire, where the raisonneur and the Comic Hero are not confronted with each other from the very beginning, there is perhaps less to be gleaned from their first discussion. Nevertheless, these scenes contain considerable detail, as we shall now see.

In Tartuffe, it is not until Act I Sc. iv that the raisonneur is introduced; Orgon himself only appears for the first time in the same scene. Admittedly, the construction of this play is unusual for Molière: Mme Pernelle, a minor char-

acter, plays the major role in the lengthy first scene, while Tartuffe himself first comes before us in III, ii. But although the interview between raisonneur and Comic Hero takes place comparatively late, it is full of significant detail.

We immediately come to grips with the character and the obsession of Orgon. Tartuffe is the living embodiment of this obsession, and so Orgon describes him as a man who

> se vint l'autre jour accuser
> D'avoir pris une puce en faisant sa prière,
> Et de l'avoir tuée avec trop de colère.
> (I, v, 308-310)

Cléante is of course shocked at his brother's gullibility; he is perhaps even more shocked to hear what has become of Orgon under the influence of Tartuffe. Having learned to detach his soul from all emotion, Orgon claims

> je verrais mourir frère, enfants, mère et femme,
> Que je m'en soucierais autant que de cela.
> (Ibid., 278-279)

Unlike Orgon, Cléante retains his humanity, for he is not obsessed. He exclaims in horror at this "Les sentiments humains, mon frère, que voilà!" (Ibid., 280)

As we might expect, Orgon is rude and mocking when opposed in his obsession, telling Cléante:

> Oui, vous êtes sans doute un docteur qu'on révère;
> Tout le savoir du monde est chez vous retiré;
> Vous êtes le seul sage et le seul éclairé,
> Un oracle, un Caton dans le siècle où nous sommes;
> Et près de vous ce sont des sots que tous les hommes.
> (Ibid., 346-350)

Furthermore, he is obstinate, as we may observe when Cléante attempts to speak of Valère (v. 410 passim). His answers become brusque and curt: "Oui," "Peut-

être," "Selon." He is not prepared to acknowledge any suggestion that runs counter to his own small view of things.

Cléante champions the point of view of humanity and ordinary common-sense against Orgon's obduracy. This is evident in the discussion of the play's theme, which he succinctly states thus:

> Il est de faux dévots ainsi que de faux braves
> (I, v, 326)

Cléante feels that Tartuffe is a "faux dévot"; he brings out the theme of the play, the opposition between truth and falsehood in religion, in two lengthy speeches. Here he is of course in favour of "sincérité" and "vérité" (vv. 335-336); the contrast was perhaps exaggerated by Molière lest he should be accused of libertinage. Certainly, Cléante spares no pains to establish the fact that many people are sincere in their religion, unlike Tartuffe. If these speeches are somewhat inartistic in their insistence, as they appear to us to be, the blame may be laid at the door of historical necessity.

In any event, this exposition scene makes the theme of Tartuffe clear to us; it also gives us the details of the plot. We learn the history of Tartuffe's relations with Orgon (vv. 281-304); we hear of Valère's desire to marry Orgon's daughter:

> CLÉANTE
>
> Vous savez que Valère
> Pour être votre gendre a parole de vous?
> (I, v, 410-411)

Thus in its revelation of character, theme, and plot, Tartuffe I, v is typical of the exposition scenes which we have discussed.

The equivalent scene in Le Malade Imaginaire does not take place until well after the middle of the play, in III, iii. However, there is a short scene preceding this (II, ix), in which Béralde is introduced and several typical elements brought out. To Béralde's question about his health, Argan replies that he is "fort mal": the obsession never leaves him for a moment. The plot is mentioned when Béralde tries to broach the subject of Angélique; Argan's reaction to this unwelcome topic is anger, just what we would expect from a Molièresque Comic Hero. The stage directions here describe him as "parlant avec emportement, et se levant de sa chaise." Béralde remains calm in the face of the storm, treating his brother somewhat like a child: "je suis bien aise que la force vous revienne un peu." Lastly, in his role as appeaser, he brings the Act to an end with an entertainment of ballet and music intended to dissipate Argan's feculent humours.

Béralde's major scene with Argan is Act III Sc. iii. Here we find many familiar features of a scene between raisonneur and Comic Hero, with the reservation that since the scene comes so late, the information offered us is less significant than in other plays. The first noticeable point is Béralde's appeal to Argan not to lose his temper. As we have noted several times, the Comic Hero tends to fly into a passion when opposed in anything; Béralde is aware of this proclivity in Argan, and treats him with caution:

BÉRALDE

Vous voulez bien, mon frère, que je vous demande, avant toute chose, de ne vous point échauffer l'esprit dans notre conversation.

ARGAN

Voilà qui est fait.

BÉRALDE

De répondre sans nulle aigreur aux choses que je pourrai vous dire.

ARGAN

Oui.

BÉRALDE

Et de raisonner ensemble, sur les affaires dont nous avons à parler, avec un esprit détaché de toute passion.
(III, iii)

Béralde's appeal has only momentary effect, since Argan soon becomes rude and sarcastic. Thus after some criticisms of medicine by the raisonneur, Argan retorts:

C'est-à-dire que toute la science du monde est renfermée dans votre tête, et vous voulez en savoir plus que tous les grands médecins de notre siècle.

At the mention of Molière's name, Argan loses his temper irrevocably:

je lui dirais "Crève, crève! cela t'apprendra une autre fois à te jouer à la Faculté."

Argan's egocentricity is also laid bare: on the subject of Angélique's proposed marriage to Thomas Diafoirus, he feels that:

[son mari] doit être, mon frère, et pour elle, et pour moi, et je veux mettre dans ma famille les gens dont j'ai besoin.

One of the play's major themes, the virtue of medicine as opposed to that of nature, is aired at length in Béralde's speeches here. He of course is in favour of nature and opposed to artificial interference; furthermore, he suggests that doctors profit from the ignorance of others, specifically of Argan himself. He remarks that doctors know how to turn popular superstition to their

profit:

> il y en a parmi eux qui sont eux-mêmes dans l'erreur populaire, dont ils profitent, et d'autres qui en profitent sans y être.

This observation shows Béralde to have penetrated the essential nature of Molière's Parasites: the fact that they profit from the Comic Hero's blindness in order to live off him. Béralde's penetration of course forms a striking contrast with Argan's gullibility in this. We may add that the raisonneur sees through another parasite whose machinations remain unnoticed by the Comic Hero: Argan's own wife, Béline. As Béralde observes to him:

> non plus que l'entêtement de la médecine, je ne puis vous souffrir l'entêtement où vous êtes pour elle, et voir que vous donnez tête baissée dans toutes les pièges qu'elle vous tend.
>
> (III, ii)

Lastly, this scene (III, iii) adds something to the progress of the plot, by means of Béralde's intervention in favour of the Young People.

Béralde, as we have seen, plays a fairly typical role as raisonneur despite his late appearance. In the rest of the work, he is almost constantly on stage, acting as commentator and appeaser and providing moral support. This, generally speaking, is the role which the other raisonneurs also play after their first major appearance. In our opinion, these subsequent appearances are less significant than the first; we will however describe them briefly.

In his later appearances, as we have observed, the raisonneur acts as commentator and appeaser, and provides moral support to the Comic Hero and his family (if he has one). He is seen almost exclusively in the company of the Comic Hero, and usually at a point in the play where the latter is suffering the consequences of his stupidity, so that the raisonneur's advice is even more

poignant. Thus in L'École des Femmes, IV, viii, Arnolphe and Chrysalde meet again when Arnolphe is suffering mental torture over losing Agnès. Chrysalde offers him the best advice in the circumstances: simply to change his attitude towards cuckoldry:

> quand on le sait prendre, on n'a point à rougir
> Du pis dont une femme avec nous puisse agir.
> (1270-1271)

One must neither boast nor be overly ashamed of cuckoldry, he claims, but accept it with equanimity, since it is after all only a blow from fate. This is eminently reasonable, though his final word on the subject does seem to go a little far, even for a man of the most liberal views: he concludes that cuckoldry "a ses plaisirs comme les autres choses."[7] Certainly, no more glaring contrast could be found with the attitude of Arnolphe. The latter replies with anger and mockery, since the Comic Hero, true to type, is unwavering in his obstinacy.

At the very end of the play, Chrysalde is the appeaser, advising Arnolphe to accept his fate with calmness and seeking to reconcile all parties. Typical is his reaction when Arnolphe, hoping still to save Agnès for himself, suggests that Horace be forced to marry a girl whom he does not want:

> Si son coeur a quelque répugnance,
> Je tiens qu'on ne doit pas lui faire violence.
> (V, vii, 1684-1685)

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[7] Chrysalde's intention here may be to mock Arnolphe gently and provoke a reaction from him. If such an intention seems out of place in the context of the raisonneur's normally pacificatory character, we may perhaps conclude that Molière is to some extent sacrificing consistency of character in favour of dramatic interest and conflict.

Typical also is the fact that Chrysalde avoids any temptation of saying to Arnolphe "I told you so"; as a man of charity, even humility, he simply tries to ensure that the situation is resolved as equitably as possible.

In Tartuffe, Cléante reappears in V, i. Here we do in fact find a new element, for a twist of the plot is revealed. Orgon tells Cléante about the cassette of his friend Argas, which implicates him in a treasonable matter. In other respects, the two men run true to form. Orgon violently condemns all "dévots" and Cléante seeks to moderate his passion, and also that of Damis, who threatens to cut off Tartuffe's ears. He gives a good analysis of Orgon's character:

> Dans la droite raison jamais n'entre la vôtre,
> Et toujours d'un excès vous vous jetez dans l'autre.
> (1609-1910)

To Damis' outburst he replies in these sage words:

> Voilà tout justement parler en vrai jeune homme.
> Modérez, s'il vous plaît, ces transports éclatants
> (1638-1639)

In sharp contrast with Orgon, he takes pity even on Tartuffe. When the latter is being led away, and Orgon is tempted to overwhelm him with objurgations, Cléante restrains his brother-in-law, suggesting that the impostor's better nature will punish him sufficiently:

> A son mauvais destin laissez un misérable,
> Et ne vous joignez point au remords qui l'accable.
> (V, vii, 1949-1950)

Throughout these final scenes, Cléante is at hand to offer comment and moral support to the family.

In Le Misanthrope, Philinte reappears several times. After the exposition scene, he remains on stage for the sonnet scene (I, ii), in which he and Alceste of course take diametrically opposed attitudes. He intervenes between Alceste and Oronte when they almost come to blows:

> Eh! Messieurs, c'en est trop; laissez cela, de grâce.
> (I, iii, 435)

In I, iii, though faced with a violent outburst of rage from Alceste, he refuses to abandon him. In II, iv, he gives a penetrating analysis of Alceste's character:

> Mais il est véritable aussi que votre esprit
> Se gendarme toujours contre tout ce qu'on dit,
> Et que, par un chagrin que lui-même il avoue,
> Il ne saurait souffrir qu'on blâme, ni qu'on loue.
> (683-686)

Philinte's insight here is remarkable: he sees the essential element of Alceste's personality in a way of which Alceste himself would be incapable. The Comic Hero holds himself out to be a misanthrope on purely rational grounds: because of mankind's failings, rather than any innate tendency on his own part to condemn people out of hand. This, indeed, is the traditional view of him; but Philinte's analysis comes much closer to the truth. Indeed, it is very similar to the view proposed by a modern critic, Lionel Gossman.[8] Our own view of Alceste's character follows closely that of Philinte: we see him as a typical Comic Hero who wishes to impose his opinions on the rest of the world. Rather

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[8] Men and Masks, Chapter III.

than the specific vice of misanthropy, he suffers from the more general one of egocentricity, which he shares with the other Comic Heroes in Molière. It is interesting to note that this view, so far from being new, can be traced back to Philinte himself.

In V, i, we have a familiar situation: the Comic Hero has reached his nadir, and discusses his problems with the raisonneur. Alceste has just lost his lawsuit: he is boiling with rage, and vows he will leave human society for ever. Philinte advises him not to yield so easily in the lawsuit, and not to be so hasty in condemning the whole of society. Alceste's reaction to this is what we might expect: rudeness and sarcasm:

> Je sais que vous parlez, Monsieur, le mieux du monde;
> En beaux raisonnements vous abondez toujours;
> Mais vous perdez le temps et tous vos beaux discours.
> (V, i, 1570-1572)

Like Chrysalde, Philinte plays the role of appeaser at the end of the play. There is a final outburst of pique against the whole of mankind from Alceste, but Philinte refuses to abandon his friend, saying to Eliante:

> Allons, Madame, allons employer toute chose,
> Pour rompre le dessein que son coeur se propose.
> (V, iv, 1807-1808)

The Comic Hero, we may be sure, will not be allowed to remain in his state of solitary desperation.

The only play we have not mentioned here is L'École des Maris, where the position of the raisonneur is somewhat different insofar as he is himself involved in the plot. Ariste of necessity is less detached than his confrères in other plays. Thus the chief point of interest for us in Act III Sc. v passim is the contrast between Comic Hero and raisonneur. Sganarelle, believ-

ing himself to have triumphed over Ariste, is full of sarcasm and mockery and quite blind to the truth of the situation. He invites Ariste in these terms to follow him:

> Venez, beau directeur, suranné damoiseau:
> On veut vous faire voir quelque chose de beau.
> (III, v, 941-942)

The raisonneur retains his calm in face of all this, refusing to believe that Léonor would deceive him, and thus seeing the improbabilities in Sganarelle's story ("Il parle d'Isabelle, et vous de Léonor," v. 1034). Even when confronted with Léonor, he reproaches her only in the mildest terms:

> Je ne me repens pas de mon doux traitement;
> Mais votre procédé me touche assurément...
> (III, viii, 1061-1062)

Thus raisonneur and Comic Hero remain true to their familiar personalities in these last scenes: there is even a hint of appeasement in Ariste's final words:

> Nous tâcherons demain d'apaiser sa colère.
> (III, ix, 1112)

Conclusion

The raisonneurs, often seen as the least interesting group of characters in Molière, are in our opinion as important as any others. In themselves, they are fairly unremarkable, lacking even comic features, though historically interesting as embodiments of the 17th century ideal of the honnête homme. In their relationship with the Comic Hero, however, they take on a new significance. Rarely seen on the stage except in conjunction with him, they provide an obvious contrast in character and philosophy which enables us to develop a clearer conception of their antagonist (as the Comic Hero usually is). They recommend mod-

eration, they are equable in temper; they believe in society rather than the individual as a standard of reference; they recognise the individuality of other people, and accept human failings with tolerance, being men of the world; they are intelligent, kind, and understanding. Thus by their very presence on-stage they contrast in an obvious way with the Comic Hero. This may be seen throughout the plays; but in their most characteristic appearance, the exposition scene, involving Raisonneur and Comic Hero, they serve to provoke the latter to self-expression of a characteristic kind, and usually also to anger when he is opposed. By discussion with the Comic Hero, the raisonneurs formulate for us the theme of each individual work; and the same discussion gives us the necessary background information on the plot. These characters therefore provide us with a view of the Comic Hero which is not to be obtained from other characters: we may now pass on to the Caricatures and Parasites, who give the final brush-strokes of this psychological portrait.

Chapter VII: The Parasites and Caricatures; The Blindness of the Comic Hero

We come now to the last group of characters in our classification of Molière's *dramatis personae*. Under the heading of Parasites and Caricatures we propose to discuss two groups who differ somewhat in their dramatic function, but share the same basic characteristic: they have a single attitude or peculiarity which they embody to an extreme degree. Of the Parasites, we may cite Tartuffe: rigid in his apparently unswerving allegiance to a certain style of life, he yet manages to turn this rigidity to his advantage, for it enables him to profit directly from Orgon's obsession. Of the Caricatures, we may mention Mme Pernelle. Unshakeable in her admiration for Tartuffe, she represents a rigidity even exceeding that of the Comic Hero, her son Orgon.

Both groups may be defined in these general terms: they are confined within the boundaries of their own small mental and spiritual world, reacting only to that which they are capable of recognising, and simply ignoring everything else. Such is their fundamental similarity; they differ, we suggest, in that the Parasites deliberately adopt a rigid, limited attitude, whereas the Caricatures do it without conscious intent. The former, who live off the Comic Hero, discover what his obsession is, and then conform themselves to it as well as possible in order to profit from it. Thus, in their own way, they are intelligent; the latter (the Caricatures) lack this sense of purpose. They display similar limitations, an inability to change or adapt to changing situations; but this defect is something which controls them, rather than something which is subject to their control. Thus their relationship with the comic hero is of a different, perhaps more subtle, nature: they reveal his limitations to us, but not by the simple expedient of profiting materially from him.

These ideas are further developed below: we felt it necessary to express them briefly as an introduction to the grouping of characters undertaken here. It should now be clear, however, in what way these two groups resemble one another, and in what way they differ. At this stage, we may list the characters to be treated under each heading. Firstly, the Parasites: here we propose to discuss Tartuffe of Tartuffe and Béline of Le Malade Imaginaire. Secondly, the Caricatures: here we will mention Alain and Georgette of L'École des Femmes, Oronte of Le Misanthrope, and Mme Pernelle of Tartuffe. It will be seen that we have selected certain representative individuals from each of a number of plays; we have not attempted to discuss all the characters who might be listed under this heading. Thus the maîtres of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme might be considered Parasites; the peasants of Dom Juan might be thought of as Caricatures. In the interest of clarity, however, and in view of our ultimate objective - the revelation of the Comic Hero's character - we have chosen a limited number of characters whose relationship with the Comic Hero may be considered as exemplary.

The Parasites

Let us begin with our two Parasites. Béline is a woman who comes recognisably from the old tradition of the cuckolding wife. Molière took up this tradition of the French medieval farce and used it on several occasions and in a number of different ways. Isabelle of L'École des Maris and Angélique of George Dandin stand directly in this lineage: clever, unscrupulous, verging on shrewishness, they outwit their foolish husbands and end by deceiving them with lovers. Elmire of Tartuffe presents a subtle variation on the theme: faithful to her husband Orgon, she is nevertheless placed by his stupidity in a position where, if she wished, she could

only too easily cuckold him with Tartuffe. In Le Malade Imaginaire we have another variation: Béline subjects her husband Argan to moral cuckoldry. She has no intention of cuckolding him physically; there is no jeune premier in the play with whom she might attempt dalliance. Her plans, for the time being at least, are more limited: she wishes only to lay her hands on Argan's money. This being the case, she has no real affection for her husband. She plays the role of loving wife, which is in effect a humiliation for Argan as great as if she were to physically betray him. She treats him with feigned solicitude and careful attention to all his needs, real or imaginary though they may be; but all this is done in the hope that he will die soon and leave her his fortune.

Béline is thus a typical Parasite: she seeks to profit from the Comic Hero's blindness, and so plays a constant role. The other characters in the play, without exception, see through Béline's machinations, as does the audience. In other words, it is painfully clear to everyone that she is taking advantage of Argan (or intending to do so, at least). Thus we may conclude that Béline furnishes us with an important key to Argan's character, for she shows us how blind he is in comparison with those who surround him.

In order to bring out this blindness of Argan, we shall compare his reaction to Béline with that of the other characters who have contact with her. To begin with those who see through her trickery: Toinette, with her customary intelligence, both dislikes and distrusts Béline. Despite Béline's attempts to put Toinette in her confidence, the servant-girl has no use for her. She tells Angélique: "Votre belle-mère ne s'endort point, et c'est sans doute quelque conspiration contre vos intérêts où elle pousse votre père" (I, viii). She realises, indeed, exactly what Béline is up to, and is aware

of the role which a lawyer might play in these plans: "Les voilà avec un notaire, et j'ai oüi parler de testament". (Ibid.). Later, in a discussion with Béralde and Argan, she becomes sarcastic over the whole business:

> Ah! Monsieur, ne parlez point de Madame; c'est une femme sur laquelle il n'y a rien à dire, une femme sans artifice, et qui aime Monsieur, qui l'aime ..... on ne peut pas dire cela.
> (III, xi)

It is at this point, in fact, that she puts into operation her scheme of pretending that Argan is dead: Béline's reaction is well-known, and finally serves to convince her husband of his error.

Angélique, naturally, is well aware of Béline's scheming. She herself is the object of the lady's plans: Béline intends to have Angélique put in a convent, so that she will be able to inherit Argan's entire fortune. With this in view, Béline does her best to provoke an outburst on Angélique's part, in order to have an excuse for removing her permanently from the house. We may cite such an exchange as the following:

> BELINE
> ... vous avez un ridicule orgueil, une impertinente présomption qui fait hausser les épaules à tout le monde.
>
> ANGELIQUE
> Tout cela, Madame, ne servira de rien. Je serai sage en dépit de vous; et pour vous ôter l'espérance de pouvoir réussir dans ce que vous voulez, je vais m'ôter de votre vue.
> (II, vi)

Béralde also, as we observed in our chapter on the raisonneurs, sees through Béline's machinations. He comments on the subject of Angélique's possible entry into a convent:

> Votre femme ne manque pas de vous conseiller de vous défaire ainsi de vos deux filles, et je ne doute point que, par un esprit de charité, elle ne fut ravie de les voir toutes deux bonnes religieuses.
> (III, iii)

In III, ii, he joins with Toinette in trying to shake Argan's fixed and unalterable faith in Béline:

> ARGAN
> Quoi qu'il en soit, mon frère, elle sera religieuse, c'est une chose résolue.
>
> BERALDE
> Vous voulez faire plaisir à quelqu'un.
>
> ARGAN
> Je vous entends: vous en revenez toujours là, et ma femme vous tient au coeur.

It is clear therefore that at least three of the other characters in Le Malade Imaginaire refuse to be duped by Béline, even when (as in the case of Toinette) she does her best to enlist them on her side. We may now contrast the perspicacity of these individuals with the blind gullibility of Argan.

The key to Béline's relationship with Argan is the fact that she humours him in his obsession. Argan believes himself to be a sick man: Béline treats him with the greatest solicitude, agreeing absolutely in everything that has to do with his supposed illness. Not only this; she treats him like a child, addressing him in absurdly exaggerated terms of affection, and coddling him as if he were an infant, incapable of fending for himself. In short, she handles Argan like a child: this is a state to which he is only too glad to revert, for it implies helplessness and the need for care and affection from others. Béline's reward for this is trust and affection on the part of Argan, total ignorance of her plans, and readiness to put her before all others in his estimation. Such is the strength of Argan's obsession: he rules his life by it.

Let us examine the various scenes in which Béline exercises her skills on Argan. She first appears in I, vi. Argan calls her to him for help after he has exhausted himself by pursuing Toinette around the room.

After his rage with the servant-girl, he adopts an entirely different tone with his wife, reverting to a state of querulous infantilism: "On vient de me mettre en colère", "Elle a contrecarré, une heure durant, les choses que je veux faire". Béline humours his mood, talking to him with a mixture of indulgence and affectionate condescension, as one might to a difficult child: "Qu'est-ce que c'est donc qu'il y a, mon petit fils?" "Doucement, mon fils," "Là, là, tout doux." In the matter of his obsession with his health, she spares no pains to make him feel that he is right. She asks for his fur coat to be produced; pulls his cap down over his ears; surrounds him with a host of pillows.

Her efforts, as we have noted, meet with great success. Argan tells her "Mamie, vous êtes toute ma consolation." Entirely of his own accord, he proceeds to speak of his will, and it appears that he has even told her to arrange the affair with her lawyer. Perhaps the saddest part of all this is that he intends to give his entire fortune to Béline and deprive his children of every penny, as we learn in I, vii. He asks the lawyer "Comment puis-je faire, s'il vous plaît, pour lui donner mon bien, et en frustrer mes enfants?" The ultimate proof of his foolishness is that he is willing to give cash to his wife, since the law will not permit a written will which disinherits his children. Thus he decides to give her 20,000 gold francs and two "billets payables au porteur." We can imagine the joyful reaction of Béline to such an idea: she does not even have to wait for his death to lay her hands on his money.

Thus does Béline dupe Argan by the simple expedient of playing along with his obsession. There are certain moments when her duplicity reaches comic heights which are most amusing to the audience but completely pass Argan by. Thus when Argan says that he had asked her to speak to a lawyer, she produces the man like a rabbit out of a hat:

ARGAN
Je vous avais dit de parler pour cela à votre notaire.

BELINE
Le voilà là-dedans, que j'ai amené avec moi.
(I, vi)

Having listened carefully to the notaire's explanation of how a man can leave an inheritance to his wife, Béline pretends to burst into tears:

BELINE
S'il vient faute de vous, mon fils, je ne veux plus rester au monde.

ARGAN
Mamie!

BELINE
Oui, mon ami, si je suis assez malheureuse pour vous perdre....
(I, vii)

When Argan proceeds to speak of what he will give into her hands, the dialogue continues thus:

BELINE
Non, non, je ne veux point de tout cela. Ah! combien dites-vous qu'il y a dans votre alcôve?

ARGAN
Vingt mille francs, mamour.

BELINE
Ne me parlez point de bien, je vous prie. Ah! de combien sont les deux billets?

ARGAN
Ils sont, mamie, l'un de quatre mille francs, et l'autre de six.

BELINE
Tous les biens du monde, mon ami, ne me sont rien au prix de vous.
(Ibid.)

In these examples, we see the comic side of Béline: a contradiction is set up within her between her eagerness to lay her hands on the money, and the necessity to conceal that eagerness. Equally important is the impression which we retain of Argan's blindness, since he remains ridiculously unaware of Béline's evident cupidity.

Another significant appearance of Béline is in II, vi. Here the discussion is centred on whom Angélique should marry. Argan wishes to force Angélique to marry Thomas Diafoirus; Béline hopes to discourage this, and have her put into a convent, so that there will be no question of her inheriting any of Argan's fortune. In the course of the argument, Angélique discusses Béline's character openly in front of everyone:

> Il y en a d'autres, Madame, qui font du mariage un commerce de pur intérêt, qui ne se marient que pour gagner des douaires, que pour s'enrichir par la mort de ceux qu'elles épousent, et courent sans scrupule de mari en mari, pour s'approprier leurs dépouilles.

Argan completely misses the point of these remarks, and backs his wife up. When she leaves the stage, he tells her to go to the lawyer to expedite affairs, and concludes ridiculously: "Voilà une femme qui m'aime....cela n'est pas croyable". Thus almost to the end Béline maintains her hold over her husband. It is only Toinette's trick of III, xii, which finally convinces him, by the fact of being an eye witness, that he is wrong about Béline.[1] After this, she disappears from the scene, no doubt because Molière does not need her any more; but perhaps, as we prefer to believe, because she simply abandons a lost cause. It is only Argan's blindness which makes it possible for Béline to live with him; once the scales fall from his eyes, no further relationship between them is possible.

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[1] It is interesting to compare this scene with Tartuffe, IV, v-vii, where Orgon has a similar experience. Both Comic Heroes are so blind to the truth that only the humiliation of seeing things for themselves will convince them.

Tartuffe is similar to Béline in his method of profiting materially from the Comic Hero's Blindness. It may at first prove startling to the reader to think of him simply as a Parasite, since one is accustomed to regard him as a major character in Molière. However, as we have tried to show in our discussion of Elmire, Orgon himself may be considered the major character of the play. On this reading, Tartuffe is an intruder who provides the excuse for Orgon's aberrations. He turns these to his own advantage, but only by reason of Orgon's extraordinary inability to see what is going on. As in the case of Béline, there is a glaring contrast between the reaction of the Comic Hero and that of all the other characters (except Mme Pernelle) who have contact with the Parasite.

There are numerous passages which demonstrate that Tartuffe's machinations are obvious to the other characters in the play. Already in Act I Sc. i, Damis refers to him in these terms:

> Quoi? je souffrirai, moi, qu'un cagot de critique
> Vienne usurper céans un pouvoir tyrannique,
> Et que nous ne puissions à rien nous divertir,
> Si ce beau Monsieur-là n'y daigne consentir?
> (45-48)

Dorine has an equally low opinion of Tartuffe:

> Certes, c'est une chose aussi qui scandalise,
> De voir qu'un inconnu céans s'impatronise,
> Qu'un gueux, qui, quand il vint, n'avait pas de souliers
> Et dont l'habit entier valait bien six deniers,
> En vienne jusque-là que de se méconnaître,
> De contrarier tout, et de faire le maître.
> (I, i, 61-66)

Somewhat later Cléante, in a discussion with Orgon, offers a less extreme but perhaps no more flattering view. Comparing Tartuffe to true <u>dévots</u>, he concludes:

Votre homme, à dire vrai, n'est pas de ce modèle:
C'est de fort bonne foi que vous vantez son zèle:
Mais par un faux éclat je vous crois ébloui.
(I, v, 405-407)

Mariane does not actually give an analysis of Tartuffe's character, but she has an extreme reaction to the idea of marrying him: she is ready to enter a convent, or even to kill herself (IV, iii). As for Elmire, she is the one who finally reveals Tartuffe's true nature to Orgon. We may conclude that only Orgon and Mme Pernelle of all the characters in Tartuffe are deceived by the impostor.

To return to Orgon himself: in sharp contrast with the other characters, he is completely infatuated with Tartuffe. Indeed, one might almost say that he treats the latter like a child. Dorine remarks on this subject:

Il l'appelle son frère, et l'aime dans son âme
Cent fois plus qu'il ne fait mère, fils, fille, et femme.
(I, ii, 185-187)

This, certainly, is a sign of strong emotion; but Dorine continues to say more surprising things:

Il le choie, il l'embrasse, et pour une maîtresse
On ne saurait, je pense, avoir plus de tendresse
(Ibid., 191-192)

Orgon goes so far as to express himself physically, as one might by cuddling a favourite child. Most revealing of all, perhaps, are these lines:

A table, au plus haut bout il veut qu'il soit assis;
Avec joie il l'y voit manger autant que six;
Les bons morceaux de tout, il fait qu'on les lui cède;
Et s'il vient à roter, il lui dit: "Dieu vous aide!"
(Ibid., 191-194)

This is exactly the way in which one treats children; it is interesting to compare Béline's coddling of Argan in Le Malade Imaginaire with this behaviour of Orgon. That relationship also was based on the display and humouring of

childish traits; but Orgon shows himself to be even more blind than Argan, insofar as he is the active agent and devotes himself to the object of his obsession.[2]

Orgon is concerned exclusively with Tartuffe, and has lost interest in all else. Very familiar is the famous scene (I, iv) in which he ignores news of his wife's sickness to inquire solicitously after Tartuffe, who is obviously in the best of health. He announces to Cléante that he no longer has any affection for anything but the impostor:

> Il m'enseigne à n'avoir affection pour rien,
> De toutes amitiés il détache mon âme
> (I, v, 276-277)

He believes all that Tartuffe tells him, even when the latter lies about some estates which he supposedly possesses:

> ... mon secours pourra lui donner les moyens
> De sortir d'embarras et rentrer dans ses biens:
> Ce sont fiefs qu'à bon titre au pays on renomme;
> Et tel qu'on le voit, il est bien gentilhomme.
> (II, ii, 491-494)

By extension, he disbelieves anyone who suggests ideas that run counter to his opinion of Tartuffe. Thus in III, v-vi, Damis tells his father about Tartuffe's attempts to seduce Elmire. Elmire herself, indeed, backs him up. They meet with no success whatsoever, and Damis in fact is subjected to an outburst of rage on the part of Orgon. Orgon calls his son "traître," "pendard," "infâme," "ingrat," "coquin," and "gueux." He threatens to break his arms, calls for a

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[2]When talking to Mariane about her proposed marriage to Tartuffe, Orgon uses these words:

> Ensemble vous vivrez, dans vos ardeurs fidèles,
> Comme deux vrais enfants, comme deux tourterelles.
> (II, ii, 533-534)

It is interesting that he actually applies the word "enfant" to Tartuffe here.

stick to beat him with, and finishes by disinheriting him. Elmire, while spared the indignity of being insulted to her face, is sentenced to perhaps an even worse fate: Orgon is not content with disbelieving the accusations, he insists that Tartuffe and Elmire will from now on have to see each other constantly, so as to defy the world: "Non, en dépit de tous, vous la fréquenterez."[3] (III, vii, 1172).

Finally, we may cite the readiness with which Orgon sacrifices or is prepared to sacrifice everything to Tartuffe. He begins with his material goods, first allowing Tartuffe to live in his house and at his expense, and then actually making out a will by which Tartuffe becomes sole owner of all Orgon's possessions.[4] As for the members of Orgon's family, they fare no better when their interests clash with those of the impostor. Mariane, for example, is destined to become Tartuffe's wife, despite the fact that Orgon has already promised her to Valère. He holds firm in the face of her utter despair in IV, iii, refusing to heed her moving appeal. His treatment of Elmire is familiar: he gives no credence whatever to Elmire's oblique

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[3] In IV, iii, Elmire is in fact almost called a liar by Orgon. She offers to show him what Tartuffe is trying to do with her, and Orgon describes her story as "chansons" and "contes en l'air."

[4] When ordered by Orgon to leave the house, Tartuffe retorts: "C'est à vous d'en sortir, vous qui parlez en maitre:/La maison m'appartient, je le ferai connaître." Orgon is here reduced by his own foolishness to the point of being thrown out of his very home.

accusations of Tartuffe. As we have noted, this is tantamount to telling his wife that she is a liar; not until he sees an attempted seduction with his own eyes does he finally believe her. However, it is Damis who suffers the most violent expression of his father's choler. Father and son, both being hot-tempered, exacerbate each other on several occasions, and it is at this moment that Orgon's rage is revealed at full strength. In III, vi, he loses control and shouts for a stick to beat Damis with:

ORGON (A Tartuffe)
Un bâton! un bâton! Ne me retenez pas.
(1135)

After heaping insults upon Damis and driving him from the room, he returns to console Tartuffe, but finds the latter feigning great moral injury. At this, Orgon rushes back to the door in tears, and shouts after Damis:

Coquin! je me repens que ma main t'ait fait grâce,
Et ne t'ait pas d'abord assommé sur la place.
(1149-1150)

Such is Orgon's confidence in Tartuffe: he stands ready to give up all that he possesses, and to deny all the trust that should exist between him and his family, in order to express his affection for the impostor.

We may end our observations on Tartuffe with a note on his comic side. Like Béline, Tartuffe has a tendency to exaggerate his role-playing to the point where it becomes ridiculous and incredible to the audience. Tartuffe does this at moments of crisis, when his influence over Orgon is threatened, and must be reasserted by an extraordinary effort. We learn that he applied the same technique in his first meetings with Orgon, since at the time it was no doubt necessary to make a strong impression on his intended victim. Orgon describes thus his first encounter with Tartuffe:

Chaque jour à l'église il venait, d'un air doux,
Tout vis-à-vis de moi se mettre à deux genoux.
Il attirait les yeux de l'assemblée entière
Par l'ardeur dont au ciel il poussait sa prière;
Il faisait des soupirs, de grands élancements,
Et baisait humblement la terre à tous moments;
Et lorsque je sortais, il me devançait vite,
Pour m'aller à la porte offrir de l'eau bénite.
(I, v, 283-290)

Such behaviour is hardly likely to have made a favourable impression on anyone else: but it had the desired effect on Orgon. In the same speech, Orgon goes on to praise Tartuffe's remarkable moral sensibility:

... il se vint l'autre jour accuser
D'avoir pris une puce en faisant sa prière,
Et de l'avoir tuée avec trop de colère.
(I, v. 308-310)

This obviously caricatural trait is cited by Orgon in the best of faith.

A similar situation is found in III, vi, where Tartuffe has been attempting to seduce Elmire and is accused in front of Orgon. He takes the line that he is guilty of everything that has been thrown at him, and of all other possible sins as well:

... je ne suis rien moins, hélas! que ce qu'on pense;
Tout le monde me prend pour un homme de bien;
Mais la vérité pure est que je ne vaux rien.
(III, vi, 1098-1100)

He offers to fall on his knees and beg Orgon to spare Damis:

Laissez-le en paix. S'il faut, à deux genoux,
Vous demander sa grâce....
(1115-1116)

He addresses himself to heaven, with astounding hypocrisy:

O Ciel, pardonne-lui la douleur qu'il me donne!
(1142)

He offers, finally, to leave the house, and his reward for these efforts is that Orgon insists that he see Elmire frequently, and promises to make out a will in his favour. Thus behaviour which the audience cannot fail to find exaggerated to the point of absurdity, impresses the Comic Hero as being further proof of Tartuffe's integrity. Our laughter is a powerful demonstration of Orgon's blindness.

We may summarise the role of the Parasites by saying that they humour the Comic Hero in his obsession and are thus enabled to profit materially from him. Simply by playing the role which the Comic Hero wants them to play, they obtain a hold over him which no other character is able to obtain. Thus they show us the strength of his obsession, for it is this obsession which provides them with the raw material for their operations. At the same time, they show us how blind his obsession makes him, for their schemes, however obvious to everyone else, remain undetected almost to the very end by the Comic Hero.

The Caricatures

The Caricatures are comparable to the Parasites in one respect: their stiff, almost inhuman rigidity, the single-mindedness or one-sidedness of their character. They differ from the latter in that they are even more limited: they simply exercise their peculiarities without attempting to employ them for any material benefit. Thus really the only distinguishing characteristic which they possess is their particular type of rigidity. Alain and Georgette are obvious caricatures: Molière exaggerates their stupidity and impracticability. Indeed, he has Arnolphe announce to Chrysalde that he chose these two servants precisely because their simplicity will harmonise with that of Agnès:

> ... pour ne point gâter sa bonté naturelle,
> Je n'y tiens que des gens tout aussi simples qu'elle.
> (I, i, 147-148)

Oronte is a caricature of a 17th century man of fashion in his exaggerated politeness and readiness to engage in a serious quarrel over nothing more than a bad sonnet.

As for Mme Pernelle of Tartuffe, she is designated a Caricature here because of the relationship which she bears to the Comic Hero. She labours under the same misapprehensions as Orgon, but to an even greater degree. Mme Pernelle is the first to express admiration for Tartuffe in the play, and the last to abandon her faith in him. She drives even Orgon to the point of distraction by her mulish insistence on the good character of the impostor. We will say more on this below; for the moment, let us pass on to a discussion of the character of these Caricatures.

The particular rigidity of Alain and Georgette is their simplicity. It is displayed on virtually every occasion on which they appear; we will cite two of especial interest. In L'École des Femmes, I, ii, just after the passage quoted above, in which Arnolphe has been telling Chrysalde that he hired simple-minded servants in order to preserve a fitting atmosphere for Agnès, his two servants reveal depths of simplicity unsuspected even by Arnolphe. They seem incapable of opening the door for him; when he finally manages to force an entry, he asks what Agnès has been doing in his absence. Georgette replies:

> Elle vous croyait voir de retour à toute heure;
> Et nous n'oyions jamais passer devant chez nous
> Cheval, âne, ou mulet, qu'elle ne prît pour vous.
> (I, ii, 228-230)

Apparently she does not realise with what fauna she is equating her master in this response: thus Arnolphe's servants succeed in adding insult to injury in a single scene.

In another scene, Molière gives Alain some of the most equivocal lines of the play, on the subject of women:

La femme est en effet le potage de l'homme;
Et quand un homme voit d'autres hommes parfois
Qui veulent dans sa soupe aller tremper leurs doigts,
Il en montre aussitôt une colère extrême.
(II, iii, 436-439)

Such words must have caused a fine stir among a 17th century audience; certainly, a comparison so gross could spring only from a very simple mind, or from an open intent to shock on the part of the author.

Mme Pernelle, on the other hand, is not so much simple as infinitely obstinate in the retention of her prejudices. When she has formed one of these in favour of Tartuffe, the heavens must fall before she will change her mind. In V, iii, she reduces Orgon to this state of exasperation:

Je l'ai vu, dis-je, vu, de mes propres yeux vu,
Ce qu'on appelle vu: faut-il vous le rebattre
Aux oreilles cent fois, et crier comme quatre?
(1676-1678)

Oronte provides us with two insights into the character of Alceste: he embodies to a remarkable degree the vices which Alceste finds reprehensible, but also, he is vain, and this is exactly the vice from which Alceste himself suffers. We will see in our chapter on the character of the comic hero that Alceste's fight for sincerity in social intercourse is perhaps based on the desire to be treated with more politeness and distinction than other people. Thus Oronte's artificial manner is bound to be irritating to him; Oronte greets Alceste with great effusiveness, claiming an "estime incroyable" for the misanthrope, and an "ardent désir" for his friendship. In the same scene, which represents the two men's first meeting in the play, Oronte finishes on a note which reveals his hidden vanity:

Je crois qu'un ami chaud, et de ma qualité,
N'est pas assurément pour être rejeté.
(I, ii, 259-260)

What but vanity, again,would cause him to quarrel over a bad and artificial sonnet? Thus we may see that underlying Oronte's eager espousal of the exaggerations of the age, and Alceste's rejection of them, there is the same passion: vanity, and the desire for recognition from other people.

The Caricatures have little individuality beyond the basic peculiarity which provides the leitmotiv for their characters. In them, Molière has achieved in literary terms what a cartoonist does in artistic terms: by exaggerating the size of a nose, the deformation of a face, the artist reduces a human being to the sum of his physical peculiarities. At the same time, he gives us a two-dimensional portrait, without depth; and this is also the final impression left by Molière's caricatures.

If the Caricatures are not significant for roundness of character, they are no more so for the role which they play in the plot. Alain and Georgette indeed admit Horace into Arnolphe's house, and this is no doubt important for the progress of his amour; but in this, they are only hastening the inevitable. The fact is that these characters are too slight to play an important role in the development of the action; more significant, we feel, is their comic and revelatory function.

In this connection, the first thing we must mention is the very existence of the Caricatures. They are funny in themselves, and Molière subjects them to considerable satire. He is not as hard on them as on the Parasites, however, for the latter are not only rigid but also scheming and materialistic; in fact morally reprehensible in addition to being intellectually limited. The Caricatures are free at least of moral flaws, beyond a certain vanity. They make no attempt to coerce other people or to use them for their own benefit, which is no doubt why Molière is kinder to them than to the Parasites.

They are comic by virtue of their salient characteristic, their individual peculiarity. Such peculiarities vary from one caricature to another, but they all have the same effect: to fix each of these individuals in a certain attitude towards life, to make it impossible for them to adapt to changing circumstances. Thus Alain and Georgette are funny because of their simplicity. They seem incapable of making a reasoned and calculated response to a situation: when Arnolphe wishes to be let in, they argue as to which of them will do it, while he stands at the door. On the other hand, they allow Horace to enter the house, which is the very thing Arnolphe wishes to avoid. Oronte is funny because of the exaggerated conventionality of his social manners, the formal manner in which he conducts himself even when circumstances might not warrant it, or hehimself intend what he says with the slightest degree of sincerity.[5] Mme Pernelle is funny because she refuses to believe what stands before her very eyes, and what everyone else has believed right from the beginning.

What of the Caricatures' relationship with the Comic Hero? We can offer no general interpretation of this, as was possible in the case of the Parasites or the other groups treated in the course of this thesis. Like these groups, the Caricatures do offer us clues as to the nature of the Comic Hero, but these clues are of various different kinds, so that each case needs to be examined on its individual merits.

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[5] In all these characteristics, Oronte may be regarded as the "type" of the Molièresque marquis. He may be taken as representative of a host of other, similar characters whom Molière does not develop to the same extent. Thus Acaste and Clitandre of Le Misanthrope are closely akin to him, as are the marquis de Mascarille of Les Précieuses Ridicules and the marquis of La Critique de L'École des Femmes.

It is not difficult to see how Alain and Georgette reveal the character of Arnolphe for us. What he has done in their case is to perform an over-calculation: the typical mistake of the comic hero. Guiding his whole life by the simple principle of avoiding cuckoldry, he goes too far in sequestrating Agnès, for this enables the force of nature to work even more strongly in her; likewise, he deliberately selects stupid servants, only to find that their very stupidity turns against him. In V, ii, for example, told to thrash Horace, but not too soundly, they go at it too hard and leave him for dead -- but this is a hoax on his part, enabling him to resume contact with Agnès. All this is purely and simply Arnolphe's own fault for having chosen such dolts as servants: it is typical of the way in which the comic hero's plans turn against him.

Mme Pernelle plays a leading role in the exposition of Tartuffe, and this in itself is sufficient to give her considerable importance. She also represents the most obstinate belief in one's prejudices and preconceived judgments, exceeding in this respect even Orgon himself. Special attention should be given to this point, we feel, since Orgon is the only comic hero of all those we shall treat in these pages who undergoes a change of heart at the end of the play. He ends by recognising his errors and returning to normality, which is a unique occurrence among the comic heroes. Mme Pernelle does the same, but not before she has enraged even Orgon by her tenacity and refusal to recognise the obvious truth.[6] Thus she provides the play's most

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[6]Orgon explains to her that Tartuffe has attempted to seduce his wife and is now expelling him from his own house. Mme Pernelle immediately states her disbelief: "Mon fils, je ne puis du tout croire/Qu'il ait voulu commettre une action si noire." (1657-1658) Nothing will convince her of the contrary, until the appearance of M. Loyal, who states the truth in unmistakeable terms. By this time, Orgon has in disgust abandoned his mother to her preconceived opinions.

extraordinary example of wilful blindness, a role played in the other works by the comic hero himself. She therefore preserves the play's balance, and helps it to remain within the scheme we suggest here, as a picture of self-imposed blindness on the part of a central character. Even when Orgon capitulates to reason, his mother carries blindly on in the ways of error, taking us back to Sganarelle, Alceste, Arnolphe, all those individuals who struggle to the death in the service of their ill-founded beliefs.

Oronte of Le Misanthrope is the symbol of what Alceste detests in society, and embodies the vice which causes his greatest ire - insincerity. By his eager espousal of fashion in speech and manners, his exaggerated politeness which evaporates as soon as the other person leaves, he represents what Alceste cannot accept in the society in which he lives. Thus we are enabled to understand more clearly the nature of Alceste's quarrel with the world. Yet if we consider both him and Oronte together, we may find that they are not perhaps so fundamentally different. Oronte is certainly vain; yet it is Alceste who says "Je veux qu'on me distingue." Is he in fact any less vain than this man whom he finds so reprehensible, and is his detestation based on a desire for sincerity in social contact, or on a desire to be treated with greater politeness than other people, because he feels himself superior to them? The second reason, we suggest, is the true one; so that meditation on the role of Oronte may reveal to us aspects of the comic hero's personality which we might not otherwise grasp so easily.

Let us briefly follow the development of their important scene together (I, ii). It offers us an interesting view of Alceste's temperament. There is a tension between his desire to be perfectly honest, and the restraint which is forced upon him both by the conventions of society (to which he must be sensitive, at least in a limited degree), and his own natural unwillingness to offend without good reason. Alceste's temperament is fiery and impulsive;

at the beginning, he manages to restrain it, though we can see that it is constantly on the point of eruption. He begins to speak on four separate occasions, but each time is interrupted by Oronte, who continues to address him in a flowery and complimentary style. With each exclamation of "Monsieur" (the only word he is allowed to utter), we can feel Alceste's impatience mounting. He no doubt resents both Oronte's verbosity and the insincerity of what the latter is saying. He keeps himself in check, however; his first statement is reasonable and restrained: "l'amitié demande un peu plus de mystère." (v.278). The meaning of these words is plain: Alceste is telling Oronte that his protestations of friendship are not convincing. The manner in which the words are delivered, on the other hand, is perfectly calm, for Alceste has not yet been provoked to the point of outburst.

Alceste continues in much the same vein when asked by Oronte to criticise his sonnet:

> Monsieur, je suis mal propre à décider la chose;
> Veuillez m'en dispenser. (298-299)

He is giving Oronte every opportunity to withdraw before things become serious. When Oronte asks why he does not wish to pronounce on the poem, Alceste explains:

> J'ai le défaut
> D'être un peu plus sincère en cela qu'il ne faut.
> (299-300)

There is no escaping Oronte's importunities, however, and Alceste is now forced to listen to a reading. He still restrains himself, maintaining a coldly formal front and refusing to say anything before he has heard Oronte out: "Nous allons voir, Monsieur," "Voyons, Monsieur." When he does actually burst out into imprecation, he addresses himself to Philinte and in an undertone:

Morbleu! vil complaisant, vous louez des sottises?
(326)

But Oronte ends by pressing in upon him too closely. He asks Alceste point-blank to speak, and what is more, "avec sincérité." Alceste is now put to his greatest test; yet still he attempts to hold himself back. Instead of speaking directly to Oronte, he tells a story about a supposed friend of his whom he advised to desist from writing bad verse. When Oronte asks him if all this does not contain any oblique references, Alceste replies with the famous repetition "Je ne dis pas cela." He does not wish to be rude to Oronte personally, for he has no desire to offend gratuitously; but criticism of his sonnet is a different matter. Furthermore, Alceste's patience has now reached the breaking point. He cannot restrain himself from interrupting the would-be author:

ORONTE
Voilà qui va fort bien, et je crois vous entendre.
Mais ne puis-je savoir ce que dans mon sonnet... ?

ALCESTE
Franchement, il est bon à mettre au cabinet.

Once he has begun, there is no holding him. He criticises Oronte's sonnet, and contemporary taste in general; he quotes, and repeats, his poem of Henri IV; he speaks with vehemence to Philinte. Oronte, naturally, reacts with some irritation, and from here an open confrontation develops. When Philinte intervenes, they have begun to descend to personal insult:

ORONTE
Mais, mon petit Monsieur, prenez-le un peu moins haut.

ALCESTE
Ma foi! mon grand Monsieur, je le prends comme il faut.
(433-434)

It is most interesting to examine Molière's art of psychology as it is displayed in the slow development of Alceste's anger. He is a quick-tempered, impulsive man who nevertheless is somewhat restrained by the desire not to

offend unnecessarily and also, perhaps, by the social convention that one does not express one's criticism openly or directly to a comparative stranger. He holds back, though with difficulty, at the beginning; when he starts to criticise, it is the sonnet rather than the person which he attacks; and the flood-gates only open wide after his passion has been aroused by appreciation of the Henri IV song, rather than dislike of Oronte's sonnet. Yet he remains consistent: it would be a mistake to accuse him of hypocrisy here. He restrains himself, not because he is betraying his principles, but because no-one but a savage would speak with absolute plainess in such a situation. Alceste is not a savage, he is a civilised man -- but when finally forced to it, he speaks his mind in terms of unmistakable clarity.

At the same time, we are given clear indications of Alceste's pride. He rejects Oronte's offers of friendship because they are made to him as they might be made to anyone else. Speaking of friendship in general, Alceste observes:

> c'est assurément en profaner le nom
> Que de vouloir le mettre à toute occasion.
> (279-280)

He has no interest in a feeling which is prostituted by being offered to all and sundry; he believes that "sur quelque préférence une estime se fonde." (I, i, 57). In other words, he only wants the kind of friendship which implies respect and admiration for him above other people. This, of course, is an admirable idea; but it tells us at least as much about Alceste as it does about the nature of true friendship. Thus I, ii, further develops the impression which the theoretical discussion of I, i, tends to leave with us: an impression of Alceste as a quick-tempered, proud man whose approach to social intercourse is based on a high opinion of himself as much as on any devotion to abstract principle.

General Conclusion

The Parasites and Caricatures are the last of the five groups which we set out to examine here. Like the other groups, this one has a special relationship with the comic hero which shows us a side of his character not revealed with such clarity in any of his other relationships. The Parasites give us the sub-title of this chapter: The Blindness of the Comic Hero. We have seen how Tartuffe and Béline practise their arts with an exaggerated devotion which enables them to profit specifically from the mania of the comic hero. Living off him, they recognise his blindness and laugh at him for it while managing to turn it to their own advantage. Here, for once, we see the comic hero in a passive role; elsewhere, he expresses himself actively, as with the raisonneurs, where he appears as a philosopher, or with the Young People, to whom he is a despot. The Parasites show us the comic hero's feet of clay; we become aware that he exercises a temporary and finally illusory power over the world.

The Caricatures have relationships of a more diverse nature with the comic hero. Arnolphe's servants show us the typical overcalculation to which he is prone in pursuit of his obsession; Oronte lets us see Alceste's hidden vanity more clearly; and Mme Pernelle gives relief to Orgon's obstinacy by providing an even more remarkable example of the same fault.

In sum, our last group reveals the Comic Hero as a man not so much in control of the world as he would have us believe, subject in fact to being deceived or used by any unscrupulous individual who knows how to humour him. With this final, and important, impression, we may turn to the systematic examination of the Comic Hero himself.

Chapter VIII: The Background of the Comic Hero

Introduction

We come now to the culminating point of our inquiry into the plays of Molière. Throughout the preceding pages we have sought to examine the way in which a picture of a Comic Hero is built up in nine of these plays. The basic principles of the inquiry are stated in Chapters I and II: taking the concept of the comic hero as central, we then proceed to define this individual as having an obsession and seeking to impose this on other people. The obsession causes the comic hero to be blind to the truth or reality of his surroundings. Thus we conclude that Molière's comedy rests on the central concept of a particular type of individual; a moral theme is brought in through the attempt of the comic hero to impose his ego on others; and the major comic effects result from the blindness of the comic hero, which firstly, causes his behaviour to be inappropriate to his situation, and secondly - the ultimate irony - makes him end by acting against his own best interests. Thus the two abstract themes, morality and the comic, are artistically united by Molière in the human and dramatic embodiment of the Comic Hero.

In Chapters 3 to 7 we saw how the comic hero stands physically at the centre of each play, and gained differing insights into him from the various groups. Let us summarise these. He is a man who in two cases at least (Orgon and M. Jourdain) was apparently once "normal" and has subsequently changed under the influence of an obsession (the Wives show us this); who is willing to sacrifice to this obsession anyone over whom he has control (he does this with the Young People); who firmly believes in his principles and is willing to give them an intellectual formulation, but only up to a certain point, when he

becomes irate (as we see from the raisonneurs); who can easily be led or even used by those who know how to manipulate him and conform themselves to his personality (the Parasites); who, finally, is never allowed to maintain his domination over others, but is tricked by individuals who understand how to lead him by the nose (usually the Servants) into giving up his hegemony.

Our examination up to this point therefore has enabled us to build up a picture both of the dominating individual, the Comic Hero, and of the types of individuals who surround him. To complete this picture, we must now proceed to an examination of the comic hero himself. We will treat him under the headings of Background and Character. The first section will enable us to gain some idea of the kind of individual whom Molière selected from the real world in which he lived as most suitable for treatment in a comedy; it will enable us to depict the comic hero not only as a psychological type, but as a recognisable human type from a definite social class, a certain material standing, even of a certain physical age, and existing in relation to a number of fairly well-defined groups of other characters.

Under Character we will inquire into the psychological peculiarities which these individuals have in common, above all, the obsession which they all share, though this takes a different form in each case. This chapter will complete the psychological portrait of the Comic Hero, thereby enabling us to show how and why he is comic; it will be the culmination of our attempt to demonstrate that Molière's most profound effects rest on the self-imposed blindness of the comic hero.

In the conclusion, we will attempt to develop a theory of comedy in Molière, basing ourselves on the central conception of the comic hero. We will suggest that it is egocentricity, rather than Bergson's notion of rigidity, which is the distinguishing feature of Molière's great characters, and consequently of his great plays. The same concept of egocentricity will give us a key to the nature of the moral theme in Molière's comedies.

Before proceeding to details, we must name the characters whom we identify as Comic Heroes, and the works in which they appear: Anselme, Trufaldin, and Pandolfe (L'Étourdi); Sganarelle (L'École des Maris); Arnolphe (L'École des Femmes); Orgon (Tartuffe); Don Juan (Dom Juan); Alceste (Le Misanthrope); Harpagon (L'Avare); M. Jourdain (Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme); Argan (Le Malade Imaginaire).

The first three are minor individuals who cannot really be compared to the others; we will therefore treat them in special notes. They are not full-scale comic heroes but do, we feel, exhibit characteristics which, in such an early play, qualify them to be regarded at least as ancestors of the others.

It should be added that there is not complete homogeneity in the other Comic Heroes. Don Juan is the great exception, of course; in background and to some extent in character, he differes radically from the others. In the all-

important trait of personality, however, the blindness induced by obsession, we find him a typical Comic Hero, and thus capable of being discussed in the same terms as the others. Alceste is also a little out of place in this company, being unlike the others in his background especially; but he too certainly has an obsession which he wishes to impose on the rest of the world. In this respect, therefore, he is a cousin of Don Juan and of the other comic heroes.

The remaining six characters display sufficient homogeneity to be treated according to principles which may be applied more or less equally to all of them. It is on them that we shall lean most heavily in our attempted reconstruction of the Comic Hero in Molière. Let us now proceed to our first topic: the Background of the Comic Hero.

The Background of the Comic Hero

1. Sex

The first thing to be said about the Molièresque Comic Hero in this connection is that he is male. This is perhaps surprising when we consider that of the eleven individuals whom we qualify as comic heroes, not a single one is female. There is no obvious reason for this; men are presumably no more comic by nature than women; nor can one adduce a prejudice against women in the theatre, since there are many in Molière's plays, while in the case of another author of this age, Racine, the majority of the leading roles are given to women.[1] A contemporary, Donneau de Visé, even attempted to refashion Le Cocu Imaginaire (whose hero is Sganarelle) into La Cocue Imaginaire.[2] Thus Donneau,

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[1] e.g. Phèdre, Andromaque (with Hermione), Bérénice, Athalie.

[2] cf. Molière, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Robert Jouanny, I, 222.

at least, felt that a woman could take a leading part in a comedy (though, unfortunately, his play was a failure).

It is true, of course, that the structure of society at this time gave greater prominence to men than to women; looking around at contemporary life, Molière may simply have found men more noticeable than women, in their position as paterfamilias and economic mainstay of the family. This would be the obvious explanation of Molière's choice of men as comic protagonists; however, the obvious explanation is not always the most cogent one. Molière's professional activities, as Moore and Bray have pointed out, had a very significant influence on the composition of his works. Now Molière was both a man and his own principal comic actor: thus it seems only natural that he should compose leading roles suitable for himself. In short, we feel that the nature of the Molièresque Comic Hero is in large part determined by Molière's own nature and circumstances, since he was the one who portrayed these individuals on stage.[3]

Had Molière not been an actor, but merely an "écrivain de cabinet" like the two great tragedians of the age, we might perhaps have found more diversity

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[3]There are women in important roles in Molière also, such as Philaminte in Les Femmes Savantes. We may note, however, that in this particular play, Chrysalde is made to appear more ridiculous than Philaminte: this despite the fact that he is not of sufficient stature for us to classify him as a Comic Hero. Much the same might be said of Les Précieuses Ridicules, where the male characters (the marquis de Mascarille and the vicomte de Jodelet) are more laughable than the two girls (Cathos and Madelon).

in his leading roles.[4] This is not to say that Molière loses by the absence of diversity: on the contrary. We may presume that he was well acquainted with the psychology of individuals like his comic heroes (for a number of their traits, he needed only to look into himself or the kind of people whom his background and upbringing would have enabled him to know thoroughly). Molière depicted as author and actor the kind of man whom he knew and could represent best; when he ventures beyond this realm (as in Don Garcie de Navarre), his art is a great deal less convincing.

Age

The same explanation might be given of the similarity in age shown by the Comic Heroes. Except for Don Juan, who is a young man, they are all middle-aged or old. In the middle-aged group (probably in their forties) would be included Sganarelle, Arnolphe, and Alceste. Somewhat older probably are Orgon, Jourdain, and Argan, with Harpagon possibly the oldest of them all. We have precise indications as to the age of two individuals: Arnolphe is 42, for Chrysalde mentions this figure ("quarante et deux ans," I, i, 170); Harpagon is 60, a considerable age for the time (he says to Frosine "j'en ai soixante bien comptés," meaning "soixante ans," II, v).

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[4]This observation is made with reference to Molière's leading roles - his Comic Heroes - and not to his theatre in general. We have already noted (cf. Chapter I) that Molière's creation as a whole is extraordinarily diverse from the artistic as well as the social point of view. But in the plays with which we are dealing here, there is always a comic hero who stands at the centre of the work and gives it unity; these comic heroes, as we have attempted to show throughout this thesis, are fundamentally similar despite their sometimes obvious differences. Even where Molière leaves his customary bourgeois milieu (as in Dom Juan and Le Misanthrope), he only does so to a limited extent. Though Don Juan and Alceste are aristocrats, they have revolted against their social background: they behave not in the fashion of an aristocratic honnête homme, but rather like the other comic heroes whom we see in their familiar bourgeois setting.

As to the others, we must base our opinions on circumstantial evidence, since no precise figure is mentioned. Sganarelle is 20 years younger than Ariste, since he addresses the latter thus:

> Monsieur mon frère aîné (car, Dieu merci, vous l'êtes
> D'une vingtaine d'ans, à ne vous rien celer...)
> (I, i, 20-21)

Ariste himself uses the words "vieillesse," "laideur," and "mourir" in indirect reference to himself, implying that he wishes to avoid the latter two eventualities. Thus we may presume that he is about 60, which would put Sganarelle at 40 or thereabouts.

Alceste's age is more difficult to judge, but in his material circumstances he is clearly well-off, and is involved in a procès; in his style of clothing, he is without affectation, unlike the other visitors to the salon, the only memorable aspect of his clothing being the "rubans verts"; in his literary taste he is somewhat outmoded, since he likes a song from the time of Henri IV. Thus we may presume at least that he is fully mature. No doubt he is of much the same age as Arnolphe, to whom he bears certain resemblances, and who also has unfashionable tastes in literature ("les Maximes du Mariage").

The older group (in their late forties or fifties) is distinguishable by the fact of having a full-scale material establishment, with a house, wife, children of marriageable age, and sufficient means to support all this. These conditions of material ease and comparative breadth of existence suggest at least full middle-age, while the age of their children (probably 20 or more, since their marriage is imminent) reinforces this impression.

Orgon is clearly a man of substance, and has two children of marriageable age, Damis and Mariane; Argan has a daughter of this age (Angélique); so does Jourdain (Lucile). In the latter case, of course, we have the caustic tongue of Mme Jourdain to help us, for she does not hesitate to bring up his age on every occasion in order to drive home the point that he is too old for

the pursuits which now interest him.

Thus she exclaims "Est-ce que vous voulez apprendre à danser pour quand vous n'aurez plus de jambes?"; or "N'irez-vous point l'un de ces jours au collège vous faire donner le fouet, à votre âge?" (III,iii) Evidently, Jourdain is far past the age in which the process of learning appears natural.

Thus the age of the Molièresque Comic Hero, stretching from around 40 to 60, would put him in the period of full maturity. What of his material circumstances at this age, the prime or late prime of life?

Wealth

The Comic Hero, generally speaking, is a bourgeois in easy material circumstances. The fact that he is a bourgeois needs little commentary. Apart from Don Juan, who is an aristocrat, and Alceste, who seems to be one also, all the others spring from that middle class which was beginning to make itself felt in the 17th century in France. They bear in fact in this respect an unmistakable resemblance to Molière's own father, Jean Poquelin, who was tapissier du roi and a successful businessman. We do not wish to imply that Molière modelled his characters on his father, but that quite probably the raw material for his Comic Heroes, who have so much in common, came from the common origin of his childhood and personal background.

As for material circumstances, the plays afford us ample information. Sganarelle, for example, possesses his own house; he must have had money for some time, since Isabelle was entrusted to his care by her father. One does not give one's daughter in trust to a beggar. Furthermore, we have precise indications as to the wealth of his brother Ariste: "quatre mille écus de rente bien venants" (I, ii, 201). Presumably, Sganarelle is not far off this himself. Arnolphe has two houses (vv. 143-146), one with a secluded garden, and a "métairie" as well, from which he takes the inflated title of "M. de la Souche" (I, i, 167-171); he also maintains two servants. Orgon has

an establishment with a full family, a servant of long standing (Dorine), and sufficient luxury to have attracted the attention of Tartuffe in the first place. Harpagon of course has spent his life amassing a fortune. He has several servants, including two laquais, and an Intendant to oversee everything. Even his son has a valet (La Flèche). The old man has 10,000 écus in his cassette buried in the garden (I, iv); he has sufficient cash to be prepared to lend 15,000 francs (until in II, ii he discovers that his son is the prospective borrower). He maintains a carriage and horses, though the latter are on their last legs (III, i); he wears a fine diamond on his finger, which to his dismay Cléante seizes and presents to Mariane (III, vii).

Jourdain also is wealthy. He maintains a household with a roster of servants including one of long standing (Nicole) and some laquais. He engages four teachers and a tailor, paying the latter for some fine and expensive clothes. He lends 18,000 francs to Dorante over a period (III, iv), and spends lavishly on Dorimène. Thus in III, vi, Dorimène mentions his "fréquentes sérénades...bouquets continuels...superbe feu d'artifice...sur l'eau," and "diamant" (presented by Dorante, but paid for by Jourdain). Argan also has a household and a servant of long standing (Toinette); he spends copiously on doctors and medicines, as we see from his long computation of bills in I, i; because of difficulties with his will, he is prepared to give his wife a large sum of money in her hand: 30,000 francs, made up of 20,000 in gold and two billets of 4,000 and 6,000 respectively (I, vii).

In sum, the Comic Heroes are comfortably provided for on the material scale, varying from the well-off to the wealthy. Because of this wealth, they are able to maintain an establishment around them consisting of a number of people with whom they have more or less close relationships.

The Household

Generally speaking, the Comic Hero lives among a group of people which takes its cohesiveness from him and looks to him as its head. This is not true of Don Juan, of course, who has only Sganarelle in close proximity; nor is it true of Alceste, who must reject such relationships since he is by choice a solitary: the very theme of Le Misanthrope is the impossibility of living in such solitary fashion in the heart of society. We may trace a kind of development in the "human establishment" surrounding the other Comic Heroes until, after and including Tartuffe, the establishment becomes a fully-fledged household. Thus Sganarelle has only Isabelle in his entourage; Arnolphe has Agnès, and two servants as well. With Orgon we enter a full-scale household: he has a wife, two children, a permanent guest (Tartuffe), and a trusted servant (Dorine). Similar is Harpagon, who despite his avarice lives on a large scale, with two children, a cocher-cuisinier, a valet for his son, and two laquais. He attempts, though unsuccessfully, to add a wife to this establishment. Jourdain has the same household as Harpagon (a child, servants, laquais), with the addition of a wife and a number of maîtres who seem to be in semi-permanent residence. Argan, finally, has a wife and two children with a trusted servant, and is attempting to add a son-in-law to the number of those who surround him.

Thus we see that the Comic Hero typically lives in a fairly large group for which he acts as the material provider and the moral and physical head. He is in fact the corner-stone of his family; and we may note a progressive development both in the size of his establishment and his importance within it, from Sganarelle, who has only one dependant, to Arnolphe, who has three, to Orgon, who has the first full-scale family and household, and on through the others, who more or less reproduce the material circumstances of Orgon. In pursuing this chronological progression, one is tempted to conclude that Molière gradually developed his concept of the Comic Hero until it reached its

typical and full-fledged expression in the line of individuals following and including Orgon. The final concept would be a man of mature age, bourgeois by background, materially secure, and surrounded by a family and household in which he has the authority of the material provider and moral head. Such an individual would in fact very well suit Molière's purpose as we understand it, and we shall seek to explain this in the conclusion to this section. Firstly, however, let us examine the people surrounding the Comic Hero in order to discover in how many cases they may be divided into the five groups discussed in the earlier chapters of the thesis.

The Comic Hero and the Five Groups

At first glance, the content of this section may appear identical with that of the preceding section, the Household. However, our intention here is to interpret the same facts from a different point of view. The previous three sections of this chapter have examined the Comic Hero from the internal aspect of the plays: we have sought to present him in the physical and material circumstances of his existence. Thus we end with a picture of a certain type of man; at this time, we will examine him from the viewpoint of our own theories. We have claimed that the individuals surrounding the Comic Hero may be divided up into five groups: Servants, Wives, Young People, Raisonneurs, and Parasites or Caricatures. As we have observed more than once, not every group is to be found in every play; but each play contains several groups, and every group retains the same basic characteristics everywhere it appears. Thus the Comic Heroes of the various plays resemble each other not only in themselves, but also in their relationships with other people; let us now see to what extent the same groups are to be found surrounding our comic heroes.

Sganarelle, the first comic hero, is found in company with Young People (Valère, Isabelle, and Léonor), an embryonic Raisonneur (Ariste), and Servants (Lisette and Ergaste). Arnolphe is surrounded by Young People (Agnès and Horace), a Raisonneur (Chrysalde), and Caricatures (Alain and Georgette, also servants, but too caricatural to be typical servants). Orgon lives with a Wife (Elmire), Young People (Damis, Mariane, and Valère), a Raisonneur (Cléante), a Servant (Dorine), a Parasite (Tartuffe), and two Caricatures (M. Loyal and Mme Pernelle); thus in this play we have a disposition of five groups which corresponds exactly to the scheme we have followed in this thesis. Harpagon has with him Young People (Cléante, Élise, Valère, Mariane), Servants (Maître Jacques and La Flèche). M. Jourdain has a Wife, Young People (Lucile and Cléonte), Servants (Nicole and Cléonte's valet Covielle) and Parasites (the maîtres). Argan has Young People (Cléante and Angélique), a Servant (Toinette), a Raisonneur (Béralde), and Parasites (the doctors). Even Don Juan and Alceste, always the odd men out, are not entirely untypical: the former has a Servant (Sganarelle), and some Caricatures (the peasants). Alceste has a Raisonneur (Philinte) and some Caricatures (the marquis).

Thus though only one play, Tartuffe, answers perfectly to our scheme, we may see that they all conform to it in some degree; only L'Avare, Dom Juan, and Le Misanthrope have less than three of our groups of characters. There is an undeniable homogeneity here which we feel justifies further our attempt to discuss the fundamental unity of inspiration underlying our nine plays.

Such is the Background of the Molièresque Comic Hero. Before summarising our conclusions, we will add a note on the three embryonic Comic Heroes of L'Étourdi: Trufaldin, Anselme, and Pandolfe. The information given on the background of these individuals is somewhat scanty and must be gleaned from various indications scattered through the play. Nevertheless, what we learn of them clearly relates them to the major characters discussed here,

despite the fact that this trio finds itself in an untypical play. The overwhelming predominance of Mascarille and the importance of pure plot (the series of stratagems) make this play very different from our eight others, which are comedies of character essentially. We will therefore not expect to find full-scale portraits here.

To begin with an obvious detail: all three of these characters are men. As to age, they are all described in the list of dramatis personae as "vieillard." The precise connotation of this in the time of Molière is perhaps not clear; but we may presume that they are some 60 years old. All of them are fairly well-off. Trufaldin possesses his own house (I, iii), in which he keeps Célie locked up. So does Pandolfe, since Anselme goes into it to see Pandolfe when he is supposedly dead (II, iii). They are all apparently avaricious, a trait which we shall discuss in the next chapter on "Character." Let us say here only that in order to be avaricious, one must already possess a certain amount of money. Mascarille speaks of Pandolfe's "ducats" (I,ii,102); we learn later that Pandolfe is creditor to Anselme for a fairly large sum (II, iii, 554). Anselme himself is in a position to lend money over a long period: in I, v, he has just recovered 2,000 francs owing to him for as long as two years. Trufaldin apparently worships money (I, ii); he has at least enough of it to be able to afford a slave, Célie.

As for the Household of these characters, or the presence of our five groups, the play offers us little information. We learn only that Pandolfe is the father of Lélie, Anselme the father of Hippolyte, and Trufaldin the owner of Célie. In the case of the first two, the fact of having children would allow us to presume a wife, and consequently some sort of household, including servants. However, we do not wish to go any further than the text itself will permit. One essential detail may be cited: Pandolfe and Anselme attempt to arrange the marriages of their offspring, preventing the latter from taking the

mate of their choice. Here already we have a hint of the typical clash between Comic Hero and Young People: the attempt of the former to impose his will on the latter, for selfish considerations and with no regard for the Young People's feelings. Trufaldin is also guilty of this sin, for he keeps close watch over Célie in order to be able to resell her and get back his money: she represents no more than an article of commerce to him.

In sum, we may say that these three characters are typical in several details of their Background: men, no longer young, in fairly easy material circumstances, they are in a position to impose their desires on those who surround them (here, the Young People), and do not hesitate to do so. This portrait needs only expansion in certain details to become that of a typical Comic Hero.

As we have depicted the Comic Hero, he is typically a man in his 40's or 50's, a bourgeois in comfortable material circumstances, the centre of his own household, and surrounded by various well-defined groups of the kind that one might have expected to find in such a household in the time of Molière. We do not wish here to enter into questions of primarily historical interest, and have undertaken this inquiry chiefly in order to better define what kind of individual Molière is displaying to us in the guise of his Comic Hero. Two elements, it seems to us, probably had bearing on the selection of such an individual. First, this type of man is the one that Molière would have known best (from his own background), and was best fitted to represent on stage in his quality as chief comic actor of the troupe. Second, and more important for our present examination, such an individual answers very well to Molière's comic purpose. His age is significant: he is at the time of life when one's opinions may begin to harden, when one is tempted to stand firm on the principles which one has spent the better part of one's active life acquiring. If a man wishes to be an egotist, like Molière's Comic Heroes, he may most justifiably do so in the prime of life, when he is fully conscious of his own

character and worth, and need brook opposition from no-one. Furthermore, the Comic Heroes' material circumstances by this time are easy: they can please themselves without worrying about money, and they support a number of other individuals who by this very fact are subject to their authority. He who pays the piper, calls the tune; and in this case, the Comic Hero avails himself of his privilege to the utmost. Thus the Molièresque Comic Hero is at a time of life which tempts him to be authoritarian and domineering and offers him the perfect situation for the expression of this vice.

Finally, the bourgeois nature of the comic hero must be considered. Whether Molière ridiculed the bourgeois in order to please the aristocrats who made up his audience at court, is a difficult question. But it is certain that the majority of his comic heroes are bourgeois and that a number of their faults are typical of the traditional image of the class from which they spring. They frequently suffer from avarice (cf, the aristocrat Don Juan's insouciant attitude towards money in his treatment of M. Dimanche); they are opposed to fashion or ostentation in behaviour or dress; they wish their children to make alliances that would be materially advantageous to them and the family. One hesitates to say that Molière's comic hero is the eternal bourgeois incarnate, for the great characters transcend any such psychological limitations; but it is true that their comic features are often identifiable as being of bourgeois provenance. We will not stress this point, since it is of little significance to our present theme; it is however important to consider as an alternative interpretation-sociological rather than psychological - which might be given of the comic hero. This character will provide the basis of the next section of our inquiry.

Chapter IX: The Character of the Comic Hero

Under this heading we propose to discuss the chief features of the character of Molière's Comic Heroes. This section will be one of the most important of the thesis, since underlying it there is the theme of comedy in Molière as we seek to interpret it here. It will be recalled that we undertook to study a series of works in which one central character, whom we designate as the Comic Hero, dominates theme and action. For a list of our nine chosen plays, with their central characters, we refer the reader to p.10 of this thesis.

We have already discussed our interpretation of these plays in several places, but we will repeat it here so that our line of argument may be clearer. It is our contention that Molière's Comic Heroes are egotistical and obsessive, and that this preoccupation with themselves or with their obsession (sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference) causes them to be blind to the realities of most situations in which they find themselves. This blindness is at the root of the comic effects which Molière creates in scenes involving the Comic Heroes, and it expresses itself in two principal ways. Firstly, we laugh at the discrepancy and incongruity between the Comic Hero's acts and those which would be appropriate to the situation. Imprisoned in his own conception of things, he is unable to answer to the exigencies of reality; a gap appears between reality and his reaction to it, and it is this gap which gives rise to our amusement. This might be described as a physical reaction on our part, involving the perception of a logical and intellectual incongruity.[1] The

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[1] cf. our discussion of the nature of the comic in Chapter II above. The idea of the perception of an incongruity is found in for example Cicero, Pascal, Kant, and Croce, and further developed in Freud and Bergson.

second reason for our amusement is yet more characteristic of the Molièresque Comic Hero: it is the way in which he becomes the prisoner of his own mind and ends by actually working against himself. What the Comic Hero wants above all is for the world to conform to his desires; yet ultimately he contributes to the defeat of his purposes because of the blindness which these same purposes bring upon him. This, we feel, is psychological comedy at its most profound: Molière is teaching us a moral lesson. He is showing us that egotism if allowed to go unchecked will lead to its own downfall. He does this with the greatest economy of means, for he removes all external elements. A character such as Sganarelle of L'École des Maris is playing out a drama in his own head. He needs no other people, except as potential instruments for the accomplishment of his will. In him is contained the entire plot of the play, for it is based on the revelation of his character. A moral theme also is implied in his internal development: he states at the beginning the egotistic plan which he has invented, attempts in the middle of the play to put it into operation, and finishes by frustrating it through his own acts. Plot and theme are thus contained within the personality of the Comic Hero: this is as pure a conception as in Racinian tragedy.[2] Lastly, the best comic effects are drawn from these selfsame elements, so that they also share its purity

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[2]In Molière as in Racine, plot and action flow from character. When we have met the central characters of Phèdre or L'École des Maris, we are prepared for whatever is to happen in the work. There is no introduction of extraneous elements to maintain our interest or keep the plot moving: the entire action flows logically from the first principles on which it is based.

Of course, this statement cannot be applied without reservation to every play that Molière wrote. Some of his works, especially the early ones, depend heavily on unexpected twists and turns of the plot for comic effects: such are for example L'Étourdi and Les Fâcheux. In our present selection, however, there is a central character - the Comic Hero - who dominates in each work. Here, the plot is for the most part simply the expression in action of the Comic Hero's character. Molière has no need for extraneous incidents in this case: our interest is sustained by the fascination of the central individual.

and psychological profundity.

In short, we feel that since the Comic Hero stands at the centre of the comedy of Molière, to discuss him is to penetrate to the essence of the work. The plot is usually constructed around the idea of the revelation of his character; the profoundest comic effects are produced by his inappropriate actions and his tendency to self-defeat; the moral attitude of the work is expressed in the overthrow of his domination over others. In this chapter, we shall discuss primarily the second of these themes: the comic effects springing from the nature of the Comic Hero. We have already discussed briefly the nature of Molière's plots;[3] we will speak in our next chapter of the moral attitude.

Let us therefore proceed to the discussion of the Comic Hero's character. We have selected several elements here: firstly, his egotism or obsession, along with his attempt to dominate over others, and the blindness caused by this obsession; and a negative quality of mind which shows itself in one or more of three traits: avarice, distaste for society, and old-fashioned dislike of anything new. Also, the Comic Hero often becomes hard and impatient when opposed or frustrated in his wishes by others: he may lose his temper, or even resort to physical violence. Despite all this, however, he commonly has redeeming features, which stop him from being completely intransigent in his relations with others, and thus save him from becoming entirely antipathetic.

We will discuss these elements under separate headings. First, let us stress that not every Comic Hero possesses all these traits of character to the same degree. Sometimes a trait is absent: thus Harpagon, though clever

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[3] cf. pp. 19-22 above.

(an intellectual quality), has no redeeming moral qualities; Don Juan is not avaricious, anti-social, or old-fashioned. Again, some characters may possess a particular trait to a greater extent than others: Sganarelle carries his blindness to the point of caricatural absurdity, while Harpagon is the living embodiment of avarice. We do not wish to imply that these characters are practically indistinguishable from one another: this would be a sad reflection on Molière's creative powers. We are dealing with a reasonably disparate group of characters, all of whom however share certain traits to a greater or lesser degree. That there remain definite differences between them does not make it impossible to draw any general conclusions at all. In sum, we stand by the validity of our conclusions as a whole, while remaining unwilling to apply every word of the analysis to all of our eight major and three minor characters.

Egotism, Obsession, and Blindness

This we consider to be the outstanding characteristic of our Comic Heroes. They are self-centred men who have an obsession which they follow to the exclusion of all else, and which blinds them to all but their own interpretation of things. It is sometimes difficult to separate egotism from obsession, and to know whether the Comic Hero wishes other people to conform to his obsession or simply to submit to the force of his personality. Thus a good case may be made that Alceste is an egomaniac rather than a misanthropist. In a famous line, he exclaims: "Je veux qu'on me distingue": this is clearly the expression of a desire to be singled out above others. Is his wish for sincerity in social contact, then, a disinterested desire for honesty, or a devious method of expressing his longing for politeness and recognition above

that which is accorded to others? We would suggest that the answer lies in a combination of both: were Alceste less egotistical, he would be less subject to obsession. We will therefore detail instances of both egomania and obsession among our Comic Heroes, but without seeking to establish which vice is predominant. As for their blindness, we will attempt to show how it results from their obsession and acts as a source of comic effects by producing unexpected results.

Let us begin with Sganarelle of L'École des Maris. This individual's vanity and egocentricity are revealed in every word he utters. We will cite a number of the more signal instances thereof. Speaking to Valère about Isabelle, he announces:

> autrement qu'en tuteur sa personne me touche,
> Et...elle est destinée à l'honneur de ma couche.
> (II, ii, 403-404)

Here is a similar remark on the same subject:

> celle que je dois honorer de mon corps
> Non-seulement doit être et pudique et bien née,
> Il ne faut pas que même elle soit soupçonnée.
> (III, ii, 866-868)

His absurd pomposity is extended to his own body, which he regards as the vessel carrying the divine essence of his personality. Not only is Isabelle to be honoured by the fact of being acquainted with him; she must think equally highly of the physical Sganarelle. This, while betraying a pompous amour-propre, is also a clear manifestation of Sganarelle's blindness. He thinks of love and human relations in purely physical terms. He believes that by locking up Isabelle he will prevent her mind from wandering beyond the confines of her

prison;[4] he thinks of honouring her with his body rather than with his mind. Indeed, with Sganarelle it is difficult to separate egotism from obsession. Where Arnolphe can think of nothing but cuckoldry and ways to avoid it, raising Agnès in such a way as to keep her mind empty of all such thoughts, Sganarelle does not begin with a principle. He wishes, essentially, to make Isabelle an adjunct to himself, someone who will do what he says and follow any precepts which he may lay down for her. His first concern is with the gratification of his amour-propre, rather than the satisfaction of any mania such as avarice or hypochondria (cf. Harpagon or Argan). Sganarelle is thus no doubt the greatest egotist of all our Comic Heroes: he has no idol in life beyond the supremacy of his own ego. Several of his remarks indicate this:

> j'ai pour tout conseil ma fantaisie à suivre,
> Et me trouve fort bien de ma façon de vivre.
> (I, i, 7-8)

On the subject of their wards, he observes to Ariste:

> j'entends que la mienne
> Vive à ma fantaisie, et non pas à la sienne.
> (I, ii, 115-116)

We may thus conclude that Sganarelle's egotism and his obsession are one and the same thing. This is an extreme case, and it explains perhaps why he is a more caricatural figure than the other Comic Heroes.

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[4] Lisette asks Isabelle on her first appearance before the audience "Toujours dans une chambre à ne point voir le monde?" (I, ii, 76). We may presume that this is the style of life to which Isabelle has perforce become accustomed.

The comic effects produced by this peculiarity are legion. Let us first examine the plot to see in what degree our laughter here can be traced back to Sganarelle's failings in character. The very warp and woof of the plot of L'École des Maris rests upon an incredible situation which the spectators must accept without question: that Sganarelle transmits messages from Isabelle and back again while remaining totally unaware of the nature of these messages. Here is a theatrical convention carried to its furthest extreme, a grotesque situation quite impossible in real life. Yet it is acceptable in the context of Molière's depiction of character: he is showing us an individual of monstrous egotism, and the actions of Sganarelle are only the logical consequence of his personality.

Not only does Sganarelle transmit messages by word of mouth: he also carries a letter from Isabelle to Valère without even opening it to examine the contents (II, iii). He then puts the young people face to face (II, ix), a feat which they could not possibly have accomplished without his help, and stands contentedly by while they discuss their mutual affection and plan an elopement! Eventually, he forces them to get married, in the belief that Isabelle is in fact Léonor and that he is thus making a fool of his elder brother. He finds a Commissaire and Notaire, takes them to his house, and makes everyone sign the marriage licence (III, iv sqq.). This is in spite of the fact that Valère, at the window, speaks directly of Isabelle:

> Isabelle a ma foi; j'ai de même la sienne
> (III, vii, 1020)

Ariste takes note of this, and tries to warn Sganarelle, but the latter sees and hears nothing except what is already in his own head.

Thus we see that the most extraordinary and the most comic incidents of the plot in fact rest on the blindness of Sganarelle. Another amusing aspect of this individual is his attitude towards other people, which is also based on complete misapprehension of everything but his own preconceptions. Thus he regards his brother Ariste with a mixture of amusement, irritation, and contempt. He calls him "pauvre butor" (III, vii, 1033), and observes:

> Par ma foi, l'âge ne sert de guère
> Quand on n'a pas cela.[5]
> (III v, 975-976)

Throughout the first scenes of Act I, where the protagonists are expressing their points of view, he is either pityingly contemptuous or downright rude to Ariste. He speaks of "des fous comme vous" (I, i, 9); apostrophises Ariste: "Allez, vous êtes un vieux fou"(I, ii, 230); calls him a "goguenard presque sexagénaire" (Ibid., 240) and a "vieillard insensé" (Ibid., 253). What is comic here, of course, is that (in Molière's view at least) Ariste is right and Sganarelle wrong; the pot is calling the kettle black.

With Valère and Isabelle, on the other hand, Sganarelle is at times full of trust and even affection, though these are precisely the people who are deceiving him. He suspects them of nothing, as we have seen; in fact, he prides himself on Isabelle's virtue:

> Dans quel ravissement est-ce que mon coeur nage,
> Lorsque je vois en elle une fille si sage!
> C'est un trésor d'honneur que j'ai dans ma maison!
> (II, iv, 503-505)

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[5] i.e. brains.

This faith never wavers, though it is groundless; almost equally strong is the pity which he begins to feel for Valère, whom he calls "ce pauvre malheureux trop plein d'amitié" (II, vi, 590), and "honnête homme" (II, vii, 610). At one point, his reaction is wellnigh incredible:

> Pauvre garcon! sa douleur est extrême,
> Tenez, embrassez-moi: c'est un autre elle-même.[6]
> (II, ix, 790-791)

He is equally obtuse when dealing with situations rather than people. Thus when asked by Isabelle to take her letter to Valère (Sganarelle believes it to be Valère's letter which he is returning), he exclaims:

> Je voudrais bien savoir, en voyant tout ceci,
> Si celle de mon frère en userait ainsi.
> Ma foi! les filles sont ce que l'on les fait être.
> (II, iv, 509-511)

The self-congratulatory tone is revealing: Sganarelle believes so firmly in himself that he is sure everything and everyone else is being organised by him to his own satisfaction. When Isabelle tells him the truth to his face, disguising it as the supposedly erroneous opinion of Valère, Sganarelle can only think that Valère is mad:

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[6]One might be tempted to regard this as a redeeming quality in Sganarelle: apparently, he is capable of some human emotion. The important point here, however, seems to us to be Sganarelle's blindness. His pity for Valère, though perhaps praiseworthy, is unfounded, since the young man is the real object of Isabelle's emotion, which Sganarelle believes to be directed at himself.

ISABELLE

son amour conserve, ainsi que je l'ai su,
La croyance qu'il est dans mon coeur bien reçu,
Que je fuis votre hymen, quoi que le monde en croie,
Et me verrais tirer de vos mains avec joie.

SGANARELLE

Il est fou.

(II, vii, 641-645)

At the end of the play, when it has become perfectly plain what Isabelle thinks of him, he cannot believe the obvious, and exclaims:

J'aurais pour elle au feu mis la main que voilà:
Malheureux qui se fie à femme après cela!
(III, ix, 1105-1106)

It appears from this that his affection for Isabelle was, in its own peculiar way, sincere. Indeed, this may have been so, provided that Isabelle's interests never conflicted with his own, in which case his love would no doubt have undergone a transformation. In any case, it is typical that Sganarelle cannot understand a negative reaction on the part of one whom he himself "loves"; unrequited love could never be a comprehensible experience to such an individual.

Two final examples of Sganarelle's self-sufficiency should be cited. He is, paradoxically, something of a moralist, who believes himself to be right and practically everyone else to be wrong, without realising that his system of morality is based on no more than the supremacy of his own ego. Thus after his preliminary discussion with Ariste as to the method of raising young women, he reflects sagely:

N'est-ce pas quelque chose enfin de surprenant
Que la corruption des moeurs de maintenant!
(I, iii, 265-266)

With this modern laxity, he compares "cette sévérité qui composait si bien l'ancienne honnêteté" (Ibid., 269-270). Yet these reflections come from a man who is in process of committing one of the worst sins: that of depriving another person of her liberty for purely selfish reasons.

Sganarelle's fatuous self-complacency renders him totally blind to anything that he cannot immediately fit into his own conception of things. The great symbol of this blindness, and one of the most remarkable scenes in Molière, is I, iii. Here Sganarelle is reflecting on morality in the words we have just quoted; Valère attempts to introduce himself, but receiving no response, actually hits Sganarelle with his hat several times before the latter reacts. Such behaviour in the 17th century would have given rise to at least a quarrel: it gives an unforgettable impression of the personality of Sganarelle, so wrapped up is he in his own ruminations on the world.

Sganarelle is perhaps the most egocentric of Moliere's comic heroes. Arnolphe of L'École des Femmes, whom we shall discuss now, is concerned with his obsession - cuckoldry - as much as with himself. Thus he is not so absurdly blind as his predecessor, though as we will see, his character is similar in all essential respects. There are indications of a limited but important egotism in him. Thus he speaks in this way when advising Alain and Georgette on the manner in which they are to receive Horace:

> On veut à mon honneur jouer d'un mauvais tour;
> Et quel affront pour vous, mes enfants, pourrait-ce être,
> Si l'on avait ôté l'honneur à votre maître!
> (IV, iv, 1095-1097)

What an egocentric view of the situation, and how impractical, for Arnolphe can hardly imagine that his servants would be intimately concerned with the

preservation of his honour.[7] Were he to offer them a few francs, he would be much safer; but his obsession prevents him from understanding such simple truths. As we have observed, Arnolphe's entire relationship with the servants is the result of an original miscalculation on his part caused directly by his obsession.

Even more serious is his attitude towards Agnès, whom he regards as an instrument created by himself to avoid the danger of cuckoldry. He speaks of her in completely impersonal terms, because for him, she has no individuality. He seeks indeed to prevent any possible development of her personality, since this might conflict with his plans for her:

> Dans un petit couvent, loin de toute pratique,
> Je la fis élever selon ma politique,
> C'est-à-dire ordonnant quels soins on emploîrait
> Pour la rendre idiote autant qu'il se pourrait.
> (I, i, 135-138)

There are two misapprehensions here: first, Arnolphe disregards the immorality of depriving another human being of liberty;[8] and second, he forgets that love can be given only by a free person. Any emotion felt by Agnès for him must be

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[7]It might be held that in the social context of the times, servants considered themselves to be an integral part of their master's household; consequently, any affront to the master would be an affront to themselves. But this is hardly true of Alain and Georgette, who are presented as stupid and indeed self-seeking. They constantly cause difficulties for Arnolphe (by letting Horace into his house, for example); in one scene (IV, iv), they gladly take money from him when it is obvious that he does not really intend them to do so. They are no more concerned with Arnolphe's honour than is Sganarelle with the honour of Don Juan. The latter, it will be remembered, runs away when Don Juan gets into a fight, and when Don Juan is dragged off to hell, can think only of the wages he has lost.

[8]The word "immorality" is used deliberately here: in the Molièresque context, we suggest, it is immoral to deprive another person of his liberty. This is exactly the sin committed by the Comic Hero: in his egomania, he seeks to force everyone else to do just what he wants. In the process, he disregards any suffering to which they may be (and indeed are) subjected.

artificial, for she is his spiritual captive. When she gains her freedom, she becomes capable of real love, and gives it to the person who deserves it - Horace. Arnolphe's obsession thus provides the basic comic situation of the play: his attempt to withstand the inevitable process of Agnès' awakening to freedom. He refuses to recognise that he is fighting a rearguard action, of course, and will not yield an inch without a bitter struggle. He consistently refuses to recognise Agnès' individuality, conceiving of her in these terms:

> Comme un morceau de cire entre mes mains elle est,
> Et je lui puis donner la forme qui me plaît.
> (III, iii, 810-811)

She is an adjunct to his personality, for he thinks of her actions insofar as they will affect him:

> Elle n'a pu faillir sans me couvrir de honte,
> Et tout ce qu'elle a fait enfin est sur mon compte.
> (II i, 383-384)

He is unbearably authoritarian in his manner at times:

> AGNES
>
> Mais quoi? voulez-vous?
>
> ARNOLPHE
>
> C'est assez.
> Je suis maître, je parle: allez, obéissez.
> (II, v, 641-642)

Like Sganarelle, he feels that he is honouring the person whom he is subordinating to himself:

> Je vous épouse, Agnès; et cent fois la journée
> Vous devez bénir l'heur de votre destinée
> (III, ii, 679-680)

When he discovers that he can do nothing to prevent the course of nature in Agnès, and that his supremacy is only imaginary, his supposed affection turns to spite:

> Petit serpent que j'ai réchauffé dans mon sein,
> Et qui, dès qu'il se sent, par une humeur ingrate,
> Cherche à faire du mal à celui qui le flatte!
> (V, iv, 1503-1505)

Such is Arnolphe's relationship with Agnès: grounded on egotism, it tends to reduce the girl to the status of a chattel. We laugh at Arnolphe's silly pomposity, and at the defeat of his plans, for his actions are precisely the ones which are most likely to make Agnès turn against him.

As for Arnolphe's obsession, we need scarcely repeat that it is with the avoidance of cuckoldry. The entire exposition and his subsequent discussions with Chrysalde deal with this subject. We may remark especially on one important detail: the way in which he extends this obsession into the religious sphere, justifying his attitude towards women by appeals to morality or pseudo-religious principles (the Maximes du Mariage, III, ii). Clearly, he sees even the most exalted concepts as worthwhile only if they are of use for his own private purposes. Thus he claims that "baiser ainsi les mains et chatouiller le coeur" (v, 598), two rather innocuous activities, are mortal sins. When Agnès asks the reason for this, he exclaims:

> La raison? La raison est l'arrêt prononcé
> Que par ces actions le Ciel est courroucé.
> (II, v, 601-602)

He speaks of young men as "vrais Satans", and assures Agnes that without him, she was following

Le grand chemin d'enfer et de perdition.
(III, i, 650)

Such words are startling when pronounced by the only real sinner[9] in the play.

Our theme of blindness bringing about self-defeat and producing comic effects is clear in Arnolphe. He is quite unaware of the impractical nature of his plans, and after a discussion with Chrysalde remarks

Il est un peu blessé sur certaines matières.
Chose étrange de voir comme avec passion
Un chacun est chaussé de son opinion!
(I, i, 196-198)

We know already that it is this self assuredness which prevents him from understanding Agnès, and thus causes him to lose her. But it proves a disadvantage in many other situations also. There is a remarkable scene (IV, ii) in which Arnolphe is approached by a notaire and actually takes part in a one-sided conversation without realising the other's presence. Arnolphe is thinking to himself aloud, and the notaire answers the questions which he raises, believing Arnolphe to be talking to him. This goes on for 23 verses before Arnolphe awakens to reality; it is a symbol of his blindness and consequent incapacity for practical action, just like the scene in which Sganarelle is hit by Valère's hat. Another very striking symbol of this reversing effect - the Comic Hero consciously or unconsciously turning upon himself - is contained in one of Arnolphe's despairing monologues. He is

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[9] In the Molièresque context, Arnolphe is a sinner, for he seeks to deprive others of liberty in the service of his own egomania.

enraged at himself for not being able to stop loving Agnès, and exclaims:

> Sot, n'as-tu point de honte? Ah! je crève, j'enrage,
> Et je souffletterais mille fois mon visage.
> (III, v, 1000-1001)

This is an extraordinary physical symbol of frustrated rage; it brings to mind another one, equally striking, though somewhat different in nature: Harpagon's demanding to see the "other hands" in L'Avare, I, iii.

Arnolphe's relations with Horace, naturally, are profoundly influenced by this obsession with cuckoldry. That is obvious; but one might forget that Horace is the son of a good friend of Arnolphe, Oronte (cf. I, iv, 259-263). Thus relations between the two of them should be of a cordial nature: it is precisely Arnolphe's obsession which prevents this from happening. The friendship is vitiated from the beginning; and of course Arnolphe is doubly funny because he holds all the trumps and yet is constantly defeated by the comparatively helpless Young People. Thus he heartily addresses these words to Horace:

> Vous est-il point encore arrivé de fortune?
> Les gens faits comme vous font plus que les écus,
> Et vous êtes de taille à faire des cocus.
> (I, iv, 300-302)

The result of his questions is to discover that Horace has begun an affair with Agnès. Thus does Arnolphe's obsession sever him from meaningful contact with anyone: Horace, Agnès and the servants have only false relationships with him, and they consistently bring to naught his well-laid plans. He suffers in front of Agnès ("Je souffre en damné," II, v, 577), is made to look a fool by his servants (I, ii), and is forced to listen to language of this sort from Horace when the latter is speaking of the (to him) unknown guardian of Agnès:

ce franc animal,
Ce traître, ce bourreau, ce faquin, ce brutal...
(III, v, 958-959)

Orgon's obsession with Tartuffe and religion is no less essential to the play in which he appears. If Orgon were not obsessed, there would be no Tartuffe in his house, and thus no play; thus we consider Orgon and his obsession, rather than Tartuffe and his imposture, to be at the centre of this work. The basic situation rests on the precondition of Orgon's blindness; so also does the progression of the plot, which is concerned chiefly with Tartuffe's attempted seduction of Elmire and subsequent spoliation of the family. It is Orgon who puts his wife into a compromising situation and then permits, even causes, it to continue after the open warnings of both Damis and Elmire. When Tartuffe wards off Damis' accusations by hypocritically admitting his guilt, Orgon falls for this story without hesitation. He sends Damis out, and then rushes after him in a fit of rage. To quote the stage direction: "Il court tout en larmes à la porte par où il a chassé son fils." Orgon then proceeds to disinherit his son and make out a will in favour of Tartuffe: "pour les mieux braver tous" (III, vii, 1175). Furthermore, he decides that Tartuffe and his wife must frequent each other in order to make it clear to the world that he, Orgon, has no wish or need to suspect his friend:

Faire enrager le monde est ma plus grande joie,
Et je veux qu'à toute heure avec elle on vous voie.
(III, vii,1173-1174)

The personal relations between Orgon and the other characters are also heavily influenced by this obsession. His treatment of his children is boldly

authoritarian; with his wife he is coldly domineering; with Dorine he is rather less successful, and is even subjected to some amusing rudeness; with Cléante he expresses his point of view in terms of great intransigence; with Tartuffe he shows all the kindness and generosity which in his blindness he denies to those who really deserve it.

Lastly, several of the famous individual scenes in Tartuffe are the direct product of Orgon's obsession. Thus in I, iv, he disregards news of Elmire's ill health during his absence, repeatedly asking after the welfare of the flourishing Tartuffe in the celebrated words: "Et Tartuffe?..Le pauvre homme!" Or in an important discussion with Cléante, he says that under the guidance of Tartuffe, he has come to regard the world as "du fumier," and is now so attached to celestial verities that

> je verrais mourir frère, enfants, mère et femme,
> Que je m'en soucierais autant que de cela.
> (I, v, 278-279)

The result of all this is that Orgon alienates himself from his family and is then abandoned by Tartuffe. IV, v-vii are the catastrophic scenes in which he suffers the results of his obsession. First, the physical symbol: he is actually reduced to crouching under the table while Tartuffe attempts to seduce his wife and describes him as a dupe fit to be led by the nose. Then Orgon must submit to the loss of all his possessions to Tartuffe and the necessity of admitting his foolishness to the family. In sum, the fabric of Tartuffe rests upon the peculiar nature of Orgon.

The particular obsession of Don Juan we would characterise as an egotistic desire to dominate over other people. This Comic Hero differs in many respects from the others treated here; his background is different, as we saw

in the preceding chapter; and the play itself sometimes appears to be hardly a comedy at all. Nevertheless, Don Juan is the dominant individual, and is himself dominated by this conception of his character as universal conqueror. The best symbol of this is the comparison which he makes between his amorous conquests and the battles of Alexander the Great: "comme Alexandre, je souhaiterais qu'il y eût d'autres mondes, pour y pouvoir étendre mes conquêtes amoureuses" (I, ii). The plot of the play depends in great part on this characteristic: firstly, he seeks constantly for new women to seduce and dominate[10], and secondly, he refuses out of the same pride to be frightened by the apparition of the Commandant, accepting the latter's challenges until the final point of no return. His personal relationships are grounded upon the same wish to dominate. Elvire was actually in a convent when seduced by him; apparently in this case he wished to prove that even the profundity of a religious vocation is no match for Don Juan's powers of seduction.

The first enterprise of an amorous nature in which we see Don Juan engage is an attempt to seduce a newly-married girl for no other reason than the jealousy which he feels over the transports of the young couple:

> La tendresse visible de leur mutuelles ardeurs me donna de l'émotion; j'en fus frappé au coeur et mon amour commenca par la jalousie. Oui, je ne pus souffrir d'abord de les voir si bien ensemble; le dépit alarma mes désirs, et je me figurais un plaisir extrême à pouvoir troubler leur intelligence, et rompre cet attachement, dont la délicatesse de mon coeur se tenait offensée... (I, ii)

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[10] He is not very successful in this, of course. His campaigns are enthusiastically conducted, but rarely brought to a happy conclusion. He does however conceive of love as a matter of conquest; we may attribute his failure in practical affairs in part to the fact that Dom Juan is a comic as well as a philosophical work.

Speaking of Mathurine, he uses the revealing words: "Il ne faut pas que ce coeur m'échappe": what is this but the desire to pursue and capture something which is free and not yet subject to his power? There is no suggestion of love, little suggestion of sensuality even; simply the wish to dominate and overpower.

Don Juan dominates Sganarelle in much the same way. He is able to ridicule and push the latter around in a manner which he obviously finds gratifying. The same attitude is to be found in his treatment of the wretched M. Dimanche, whom Don Juan amuses himself with for a little and then gets rid of. With Francisque, the poor man, he is not so successful; in this case, Don Juan does not baulk at subjecting Francisque to an extreme humiliation: the denial of the very principles of his existence for crass material gain. A triumph here would be even more significant than the seduction of Elvire, for Don Juan is not offering himself in exchange for religion as he did with the woman, but only a part of himself, the grossest, most unworthy part - his money.

Though this play is less comic than many of the others discussed here, it contains a number of comic scenes and effects. Where Don Juan is concerned, we feel, the comic is grounded upon his desire to dominate and the way in which he constantly fails to achieve this end. If Don Juan is a comic figure, this seems to be the most fruitful interpretation that can be given of him: he is a man who constantly attempts to subjugate others to his ego, and is constantly frustrated in this attempt. His chosen field for the expression of his all-conquering ego is in itself a somewhat limited and ridiculous one - the seduction of women. Surely one who discovers traces of Alexander the Great

in himself could find a more exalted area for the expression of his powers. Yet even within this field, Don Juan chooses the humblest level: that of the peasant girls. And even here, he is a failure, for he is caught between Charlotte and Mathurine in a well-known scene (II, iv), and is forced to leave Sganarelle to explain for him. What of his other affairs? When trying to seduce the wife from a newly-married couple, he takes a boat out to sea and nearly drowns. More: he is subjected to the farcical rescue attempts of Pierrot and le gros Lucas. With Elvire he is reduced almost to incoherence and is forced to appeal to Sganarelle for help, at which point even Elvire sees the incongruity between the image he desires and the spectacle which he actually presents:

> Ah! que vous savez mal vous défendre pour un homme de cour, et qui doit être accoutumé à ces sortes de choses! (I, iii)

With Sganarelle, Don Juan finds more to gratify himself in the often servile and grudgingly admiring reaction of the servant; yet we should not forget the last words of the play: "Mes gages...mes gages...mes gages". Here is indeed an ironic comment on their relationship: in the final analysis, Sganarelle was attracted to his master's pocket perhaps at least as much as to his personality.

The recognition of Don Juan's obsession thus helps us both to analyse his character and to see the play more in its true light, as a comedy. Much the same is true of Alceste.

If we think of Alcesteas a combatant for the truth, a good and honest man lost in a maze of social trickery and insincerity, we are likely to fall

into the error of Rousseau, who saw Alceste as a true hero and criticised Molière for making him suffer. On this reading, Le Misanthrope is not a comedy at all. Let us therefore ask ourselves why Alceste wishes social intercourse to be grounded on sincerity rather than flattery or convention. Essentially, it is because politeness makes no distinction between people, and Alceste wishes to be distinguished above others. This is perfectly clear in the following words addressed to Oronte:

> Je refuse d'un coeur la vaste complaisance
> Qui ne fait de mérite aucune différence;
> Je veux qu'on me distingue; et pour le trancher net,
> L'ami du genre humain n'est point du tout mon fait.
> (I, i, 61-64)

Alceste is therefore an egotist; his cry for sincerity in social contact, however desirable a thing that might be in itself, is grounded on his desire to be recognised above everyone else. In this, therefore, he is no better than Orgon or even Don Juan, with whom he shares an overweening regard for the self. Here, indeed, is the key to the comic nature of the play, which like Dom Juan or Tartuffe is often regarded as less funny than other works of Molière. Restrained it may be; as one of its first critics, Donneau de Visé, observed, it makes one "rire dans l'âme". But it remains a comedy, and we will be more conscious of that if we conceive of Alceste as an egotist who seizes on a principle and uses it in the service of his egotism, rather than as the defender of a high moral truth.

The outrance of Alceste's character, evident almost everywhere, lends force to the above argument. One may think of his furious use of expletives: "Morbleu!", Têtebleu!" in I, i; the way in which words pour out of him with the force of a torrent. In three lines he condemns

tous ces grands faiseurs de protestations,
Ces affables donneurs d'embrassades frivoles,
Ces obligeants diseurs d'inutiles paroles...
(I, i, 44-46)

Among men, he claims, he finds only "lâche flatterie...injustice, intérêt, trahison, fourberie" (I, i, 93-94). Even Philinte's behaviour he treats in these terms:

Morbleu! c'est une chose indigne, lâche, infâme,
De s'abaisser ainsi jusqu'à trahir son âme;
Et si, par un malheur, j'en avais fait autant,
Je m'irais, de regret, pendre tout à l'instant.
(I, i, 27-28)

Instead of blindness, we may speak of wilful disregard for all practical matters on the part of Alceste. Where our other Comic Heroes are simply forgetful of the truth of their situation, Alceste wilfully and stubbornly refuses to recognise it, though he is perfectly aware of its existence. It is a deliberate decision in which no wavering is permissible. Thus his judgment of men in general is this:

C'est que jamais, morbleu! les hommes n'ont raison,
Que le chagrin contre eux est toujours de saison
(II, v, 687-688)

Surely no reasonable person would go so far.

The situations in which Alceste is involved, and the progress of the plot insofar as it depends on him, are all powerfully influenced by his obsession. A less compulsive man might never have fallen in love with such a girl as Célimène in the first place; having made that mistake, Alceste then proceeds to render the relationship impossible by his insistence upon honesty.

Here is Alceste's love as conceived by himself:

> Mon amour ne se peut concevoir, et jamais
> Personne n'a, Madame, aimé comme je fais.
> (II, i, 523-524)

Yet he wishes to break off this affection, for he is dissatisfied with Célimène's conduct:

> Je ne le cèle pas, je fais tout mon possible
> A rompre de ce coeur l'attachement terrible;
> Mais mes plus grands efforts n'ont rien fait jusqu'ici,
> Et c'est pour mes péchés que je vous aime ainsi.
> (Ibid., 517-520)

There are two reasons for this, neither of which he makes any attempt to dissemble. First, as he says to her

> Vous avez trop d'amants qu'on voit vous obséder
> (Ibid., 459)

Second, he objects to the insincerity of the habitués of her salon. Here is his own attitude towards insincerity in love:

> Plus on aime quelqu'un, moins il faut qu'on le flatte;
> A ne rien pardonner le pur amour éclate
> (II, iv, 701-702)

Clearly, such ideas are incompatible both with Célimène's personality and the type of life which she wishes to live.

We may ask ourselves whether Alceste's relationship with Célimène bears any resemblance to his other attitudes. We have suggested that it is primarily egotism which leads him to denounce insincerity in social contact: certain passages indicate that the same egotism underlies his attempts to organise

Célimène's life for her. When he discovers the letter which she has written to Oronte, revealing a certain kindness for the latter, Alceste flies into one of his familiar rages. Célimène does not belong completely to him as he had thought. He makes an extraordinary comment which we shall quote at length:

> Oui, je voudrais qu'aucun ne vous trouvât aimable,
> Que vous fussiez réduite en un sort misérable,
> Que le Ciel, en naissant, ne vous eût donné rien,
> Que vous n'eussiez ni rang, ni naissance, ni bien,
> Afin que de mon coeur l'éclatant sacrifice
> Vous pût d'un pareil sort réparer l'injustice,
> Et que j'eusse la joie et la gloire, en ce jour,
> De vous voir tenir tout des mains de mon amour.
> (IV, iii, 1425-1432)

In other words, Alceste wishes Célimène to be completely dependent upon him, to be the creature of his affections, existing not in herself, but as a by-product of his personality. One is reminded of Arnolphe, who thinks of Agnès as a piece of wax on which he can stamp whatever impression he wishes.

Indeed, Alceste's principles if applied thoroughly would make all social contact impossible. This is evident in the exchange with Philinte (I, i), where he admits that he would speak truthfully even to such individuals as "Dorilas" and "la vieille Émilie". Even the tolerant Philinte is constrained to remark here "Vous vous moquez". The results of this obstinacy can be seen in Alceste's quarrel with Oronte, one of the play's major sub-plots. Were it not for Philinte's equanimity, Alceste's rudeness in I, i might easily cause a fight here as well. Finally, there is the matter of Alceste's lawsuit, which again is made to depend entirely upon his obsession. In this particular case, we come close to the essence of Alceste. We know that he has preconceived ideas about humanity which he will not give up, even if they prove to be erroneous. He has condemned his fellow men without a fair trial, and intends only to

pronounce an irreversible sentence upon them. Thus he observes to Philinte:

> Je voudrais, m'en coutât-il grand'chose,
> Pour la beauté du fait avoir perdu ma cause.
> (I, i, 201-202)

When he finally learns that he has in fact lost the trial, he exlaims

> pour vingt mille francs, j'aurai droit de pester
> Contre l'iniquité de la nature humaine,
> Et de nourrir pour elle une immortelle haine.
> (V, ii, 1548-1550)

Mankind has no possibility of redemption in face of such intransigence. Alceste's only sensible course of action, since his mind is made up, is to leave society altogether. He gives a hint of this in his first discussion with Philinte:

> parfois il me prend des mouvements soudains
> De fuir dans un désert l'approche des humains.
> (I, i, 143-144)

At the end of the play, he actually puts the plan into effect, announcing his desire to retire to a "désert," an "endroit écarté/ Où d'être homme d'honneur on ait la liberté." (V, iv, 1805). This is the only solution to Alceste's case; when he takes this action, the play naturally comes to an end, for it was based quite simply on the tension between Alceste's obsessive demands and the refusal of other people to answer to his personal and egotistic definition of correct conduct.

The egotism of Harpagon is obvious enough to need hardly any discussion. The old man is a caricatural figure scarcely credible as a human being, a dessicated, pitiless embodiment of the lust for lucre. Robert Jouanny describes him as "ce monstre d'égoïsme".[11] His treatment of children, servants, prospective

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[11] Molière: Oeuvres Complètes, II, 237.

wife, even Frosine, is inspired by no other wish than to disburse as little as possible and maximise his revenue to the greatest degree. He even dominates the atmosphere of the play, for it is in L'Avare that we find the most unpleasant examples of ingratitude and treachery among the secondary characters of Molière's plays. Cléante has bitter quarrels with Harpagon, almost coming to blows; Valère deceives him as his Intendant, while his own daughter Mariane connives at this; La Flèche actually robs him, giving rise to the pathetic monologue in which he bemoans his loss with frantic and desperate emotion. To us, what is of greatest interest in L'Avare is the blindness of Harpagon. We will therefore trace the theme of blindness through the play, for it is this which keeps Harpagon comic and prevents him from stepping over the brink of tragedy on which he so frequently stands.

Let us detail certain instances in which Harpagon's obsession works against himself, preventing him from fulfilling his purposes. For example, Harpagon's avarice causes him to keep Cléante on a very short allowance, which in turn causes the young man to borrow money in order to live as he wishes. This leads to the famous scene (II, ii) in which Harpagon appears as lender and Cléante as borrower, with its details of the ruinous terms on which the loan is to be made, and the absurd items which the borrower is to take in lieu of some of the money. In another case, Harpagon pursues Mariane with the object of marriage. Here he has as rival his own son; this cannot be blamed directly on his avarice, but certainly a man less obsessive would be likely to recognise the disparity in age and retire gracefully in such a situation. Harpagon's avarice does come into play, of course, as the aspect of his character least likely to attract a young girl. He hardly attempts to restrain it, obviously

not realising what an effect it must have. This tension between avarice and his emotion for Mariane produces more than one famous scene: there is III, i, in which he instructs his servants as to how they can save money in a dinner which he is preparing for the prospective fiancée. The details are grotesque. Thus La Merluche complains that his "haut-de-chausses" is full of holes "et qu'on me voit, révérence parler ...". Harpagon advises him in this manner: "Rangez cela adroitement du côté de la muraille, et présentez toujours le devant au monde.". Another scene of this kind is III, vii, where Harpagon is trapped by his own obsession just like Arnolphe in front of Horace. Here Cléante takes a diamond ring from the miser's finger to offer it to Mariane, and proposes an elegant collation. Harpagon becomes apoplectic at this idea, but can say nothing openly before Mariane, and is reduced to whispered threats to his son.

Two other amusing scenes are I, iii and iv. Here Harpagon is obsessed by the cassette buried in his garden, and in his desire to keep this a secret, makes it quite plain that he has something to hide. This exchange takes place between him and La Flèche:

HARPAGON
Ne serais-tu point homme à aller faire courir le bruit
que j'ai chez moi de l'argent caché?

LA FLECHE
Vous avez de l'argent caché?

HARPAGON
Non, coquin, je ne dis pas cela. (I, iii)

Here also is the famous request for La Flèche to show his other hands - "Les autres". This is an admirable physical and dramatic representation of Harpagon's

blindness; in the same connection, we may mention IV, vii, where he is frantic over losing the cassette, and actually seizes his own arm as perhaps being that of the thief. What does such a scene demonstrate except the blindness of the Comic Hero, the single-mindedness which ends by turning back upon itself? We have already discussed Sganarelle being hit by a hat and Arnolphe talking to a notaire without realising it; Harpagon joins the company of these Comic Heroes whose obsession is symbolised by a striking physical gesture.

Harpagon is easily fooled as a result of his blindness. Valère, for example, finds it easy to enter Harpagon's house as a supposed Intendant and, by means of false attention to economy, to be given complete control of financial arrangements. Maître Jacques, who is devoted to Harpagon, sees through Valère (III, i), and protests openly, but is rewarded firstly by being ignored and finally by being beaten. Not only this: Valère is rewarded for his supposed fidelity by the custody of Élise, whom Harpagon had reserved for le seigneur Anselme. By cleverly agreeing with all that Harpagon says, and apparently opposing Élise (I, v), Valère brings about exactly what he wishes, and exactly the opposite of what Harpagon would wish. Indeed, Valère is so open in his speech as to become mocking; when Harpagon is speaking his famous line "Sans dot!", Valère pretends to agree, and then insinuates a contrary opinion, but without making any impression on the miser:

HARPAGON

Sans dot.

VALÈRE

Il est vrai: cela ferme la bouche à tout, sans dot. Le moyen de resister à une raison comme celle-là?

Frosine is another one who knows how to make a donkey of Harpagon by telling him what he wants to hear. She is encouraged by him to approach Mariane,

and tries to set his mind at rest concerning the obvious difference in age between them:

FROSINE

...On lui voit dans sa chambre quelques tableaux et quelques estampes; mais que pensez-vous que ce soit? Des Adonis? des Céphales? des Pâris? et des Apollons? Non; de beaux portraits de Saturne, du roi Priam, du vieux Nestor, et du bon père Anchise sur les épaules de son fils.

HARPAGON

Cela est admirable! Voilà ce que je n'aurais jamais pensé... (II, v)

Maître Jacques finds it easy to trick Harpagon by the same technique of telling him what he wants to hear. When the cassette is stolen, Harpagon accuses Maître Jacques, who denies it, but tries to implicate Valère. Knowing nothing of the incident, he repeats what Harpagon in his eagerness cannot resist telling him:

HARPAGON

L'as-tu vu rôder autour du lieu où j'avais mis mon argent?

MAITRE JACQUES

Oui, vraiment. Où était-il votre argent?

HARPAGON

Dans le jardin.

MAITRE JACQUES

Justement: je l'ai vu rôder dans le jardin. (V, ii)

The scene is one of the most comic in the play; it rests quite clearly on the blindness of the comic hero.

In sum, Harpagon is the cause of all his own troubles, chiefly because

he refuses to see the truth. At one point, he makes Maître Jacques repeat what other people say of him. Jacques is unwilling to do this, knowing it will be unflattering; however, at Harpagon's urging he yields, ending "jamais on ne parle de vous, que sous les noms d'avare, de ladre, de vilain, et de fesse-mathieu." This is Harpagon's reaction:

HARPAGON, en le battant.
Vous êtes un sot, un maraud, un coquin, et un impudent.
(III, i)

Harpagon cannot see what he does not want to see; at the same time, he sees what he wants to see with such passion that it excludes all other possibilities. Thus in a highly amusing quiproquo with Valère, Harpagon is questioning the young man about his cassette, while the latter is talking about Élise. It becomes perfectly obvious that Valère's words cannot refer to a strong box, but Harpagon does not notice the discrepancy:

HARPAGON
He! dis-moi donc un peu: tu n'y as point touché?

VALERE
Moi, y toucher? ...c'est d'une ardeur toute pure et respectueuse que j'ai brûlé pour elle.

HARPAGON
Brûlé pour ma cassette! (V, iii)

Such being the case, it is only just that Harpagon should finally give up Mariane in favour of his money. As the last lines of the play have it:

ANSELME
...Allons vite faire part de notre joie.

HARPAGON
Et moi, voir ma chère cassette. (V, vi)

Like the majority of the Comic Heroes, Harpagon in the end brings all misunderstandings and ambiguities to a conclusion by returning to the object of his obsession, his first and only true love.

M. Jourdain has none of Harpagon's stark inhumanity. Sturdy, intelligent, firm in character, a successful businessman, he must closely resemble many of the men that Molière met in his early upbringing and the ambience of his family. Perhaps even Jean Poquelin père provided a model for the type. In any case, individuals like Jourdain must have been familiar to Molière and the society of the time. For this reason, possibly, Jourdain is firmly rooted in reality; yet he resembles the other Comic Heroes in his egotism and consequent blindness. In Jourdain, egotism takes two forms: the attempt to domineer over others, and a comical and unusual vanity. What is often harsh egotistic authoritarianism in other Comic Heroes, becomes muted in Jourdain in keeping with the general atmosphere of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. He is of course obsessed with himself, just like a Harpagon or an Argan, but the significant difference is that he wants to imitate other people. Harpagon stands alone as an individual: he has no wish to imitate, or even pay any attention to, anyone else. He wants to reign supreme in his own small world. Jourdain also wants to stand at the centre of a world organised by himself, but he wishes to transform himself and his world according to a social code exemplified by certain others (Dorante, for example). Thus Jourdain must submit to people like Dorante and Dorimène, while remaining master in his own family. This situation produces a comic tension revealed quite clearly in for example the early scenes with his maîtres. Here Jourdain is faced with men who can teach him arts which he aspires to possess, and so he is forced to remain respectful and attentive with them. At the same time, he has a good opinion of his own capabilities, as we will see.

Jourdain's vanity is a muted egotism. He differs from the other Comic Heroes not in quality, but in quantity: he has the same tendencies towards authoritarianism, but is forced to restrain himself in the presence of others whose social superiority he has decided to recognise. We may cite several instances of the strength of his personality. He consistently refuses to listen to his wife, interrupting her rudely with such injunctions as "Paix!" "Taisez-vous," "Vous tairez-vous?" (III, iv). With Cléante he is no more polite. When the latter honestly admits that he is not a "gentilhomme," Jourdain roundly tells him "Touchez là, Monsieur: ma fille n'est pas pour vous." (III, xii). With minor servants he is overbearing; he calls them simply in order to demonstrate his authority over them:

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN
Laquais! holà, mes deux laquais!

PREMIER LAQUAIS
Que voulez-vous, Monsieur?

MONSIEUR JOURDAIN
Rien. C'est pour voir si vous m'entendez bien. (I, ii)

Jourdain certainly has the seeds of egotism in him, even though these are not developed to any great extent in the play. His egotism, as we have suggested, is well shown in his vanity. The last example cited above, that of the laquais, will serve to lead us into some observations on this vanity. Jourdain's egotism is less harmful to other people than that of other Comic Heroes, for it tends to reveal itself in this weakened (and more comic) form. He believes that he merits the best in all things, simply because he is himself. Thus he criticises the maître de musique for having a piece of music composed by one of his students: "il ne fallait pas faire cela par un écolier, et vous n'étiez pas

trop bon vous-même pour cette besogne-là" (I, ii). Though critical of certain aspects of his new clothes, he wishes to walk through the town so as to be exposed to the public in his magnificence; he also displays himself to the feigned admiration of his professors (I, ii). He is confident of his ability to dance a minuet, which as Jouanny notes,[12] is a light and graceful dance totally unsuited to a man of Jourdain's character and physical appearance.

As we have noted, this same vanity leads Jourdain into an amusing paradox: he has a certain contempt for the arts which, as a man with social ambitions, he has decided he must acquire. His very first remarks when entering onstage are directed to the music and dancing masters: "Hé bien, Messieurs: qu'est-ce? me ferez-vous voir votre petite drôlerie?". This is a disparaging reference to a "prologue...de chansons et de danse" no doubt composed with loving care by the two artists. After the first song, he comments that it is "un peu lugubre, elle endort," and proceeds to sing a piece about "Janneton...plus douce qu'un mouton." This he apparently holds to be superior to the musician's composition.

From Jourdain's vanity, we may turn to its consequence: the blindness which it induces in him. We have seen in the chapter on Parasites how Dorante tricks him: III, iv is a well-known scene in which Dorante has Jourdain detail the money which he owes the latter and concludes: "Somme totale est juste: quinze mille huit cents livres. Mettez encore deux cents pistoles que vous m'allez donner, cela fera justement dix-huit mille francs, que je vous payerai au premier jour." (III, v). The maîtres also live off him, while scarcely able to restrain themselves from laughing in his face, as in the dancing-lesson of II, i. Covielle, who invents the turquerie which fulfils Jourdain's profoundest desires, understands him perfectly and is thus enabled to lead him by the nose. He remarks to his

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[12] Oeuvres, II, n. 1520

master Cléante:

> Vous moquez-vous, de le prendre sérieusement avec un homme comme cela? Ne voyez-vous pas qu'il est fou? et vous coûtait-il quelque chose de vous accommoder à ses chimères? (III, xiii)

Thus does Jourdain become the dupe of anyone clever enough to understand and humour him. We laugh at the spectacle of an intelligent man disregarding his natural talents in favour of accomplishments not particularly admirable in themselves, and certainly unsuited to him. One thinks of his description of the difference between "prose" and "vers": useless knowledge, as his wife amply demonstrates. Another symbolic scene in this respect is his conversation with the maître de philosophie. Here Jourdain asks for advice on the most elegant phrasing of the sentence "Belle Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour." The maître suggests various possibilities, to conclude that Jourdain's own simple version was the best. There could hardly be a clearer or more subtly comic demonstration of Jourdain's error.

Our last Comic Hero, Argan, suffers from the same fault as the others. He is an egotist who considers himself before all others, and isolates himself for this reason. The first scene of the play is highly significant in this respect. Here we see Argan sitting alone in his room examining his medical bills and calculating the cost of them. Two things immediately strike the reader: Argan's solitude, and his preoccupation with himself. The stage directions run: Argan, seul dans sa chambre.... This has a direct symbolic value, for Argan is alone by choice. He sets himself up against the rest of the world, and does everything in his power to control and organise it according to his needs (real or imaginary though they be). Indeed, he is no less solitary at the end of the play than at the beginning. In Act I Scene i he sits wrapped up in

contemplation of what is being done for his own personal health and well-being; in Act III Scenes xiv and xv he floats away in the imaginary splendour of his medical dignity, the only one of all those present on the stage who actually believes himself to have become a doctor by virtue of a burlesque ceremony.

An equally important point is Argan's attention to his physical condition. An obsession with one's body is perhaps the farthest point to which self-love can be taken. There is nothing of the spirit in this: and Argan neglects all spiritual qualities in favour of the grossly corporeal. We may compare him with Alceste, who though obsessed with himself, does not go so far as to worry about his mere body: Alceste is concerned rather with sincerity and honesty, with the respect he feels that others owe him. Argan has little interest in such matters: he seems to conceive of himself as a body above all, a physical entity which must be cared for and pampered by physical methods. One is reminded of Sganarelle or Arnolphe, both of whom lay stress on the honour which they are to do their respective wives by the fact of going to bed with them.

Argan speaks of his body with pleasure and affection. He reflects thus over a turn of phrase employed by his druggist: "Ce qui me plaît de Monsieur Fleurant, mon apothicaire, c'est que ses parties sont toujours fort civiles: 'les entrailles de Monsieur, trente sols.'" He delights in repeating the names of medicines and the parts of his body which each is destined to cure or relieve: "le bas-ventre de Monsieur," "la bile de Monsieur," "les vents de Monsieur." He expects everyone to have the same solicitous interest in even his lower physical functions; rising from his <u>chaise percée</u> (I, ii), he asks Toinette: "Mon lavement d'aujourd'hui a-t-il bien opéré?" Any aspect of his activities apparently has for him an intrinsic value which should be appreciated by other people as well.

Argan, like the other Comic Heroes, is impatient with opposition and eager to submit others to his authority. Thus when Toinette asks him why he wishes to marry his daughter to a doctor, he replies: "C'est pour moi que je lui donne ce médecin; et une fille de bon naturel doit être ravie d'épouser ce qui est utile à la santé de son père." (I, v). Lest we should make any mistake in interpreting this, he repeats the same sentiments later in a discussion with Béralde, on the subject of whether his son-in-law is to suit him or his daughter: "Il doit être, mon frère, et pour elle, et pour moi, et je veux mettre dans ma famille les gens dont j'ai besoin."(III, iii). When Toinette asks him what reason he has to force his daughter into a relationship which has absolutely no attraction for her, he expresses himself thus:

> Ma raison est que, me voyant infirme et malade comme je suis, je veux me faire un gendre et des alliés médecins, afin de m'appuyer de bons secours contre ma maladie, d'avoir dans ma famille les sources des remèdes qui me sont nécessaires, et d'être à même des consultations et des ordonnances. (I, v)

Argan has full authority over Angélique, and he exercises it to the full. With those whom he cannot control, he resorts to rudeness and brusquerie. He is insufferably rude to Toinette. In I, i, when she fails to come running at the first sound of his bell, he shouts "chienne," "coquine," "carogne," and uses these expletives to her face when she finally appears. He has little patience with Béralde, despite the latter's calm and circumspect approach to difficult matters such as Angélique's marriage. Even Cléante feels the heavy hand in his disguise as Angélique's music-master. When he has presented his impromptu opera to Argan and the assembled company, Argan abruptly dismisses him;

ARGAN

Fort bien. Je suis votre serviteur, Monsieur; jusqu'au revoir. Nous nous serions bien passés de votre impertinent opéra.

CLEANTE

J'ai cru vous divertir.

ARGAN

Les sottises ne divertissent point. (II, v)

Like the other Comic Heroes, Argan has an obsession which forms the centre of his life and to which he wishes to submit all those who surround him. But like them, Argan goes too far. He lets his love of medicine blind him to reality, and at this point becomes a comic figure, for he is no longer capable of reacting appropriately to people or situations. A good example of this can be seen in the quiproquo which he has with Angélique over the identity of her prospective husband. Argan is speaking of Thomas Diafoirus, while Angélique is thinking of Cléante:

ARGAN

De bonne physionomie.

ANGELIQUE

Très-bonne.

ARGAN

Sage, et bien né.

ANGELIQUE

Tout à fait.

ARGAN

Fort honnête.

ANGELIQUE

Le plus honnête du monde.

ARGAN

Qui parle bien latin, et grec.

ANGELIQUE
C'est ce que je ne sais pas.
(I, v)

Argan's pursuit of a fixed idea here reminds us of Harpagon's conversation with Valère cited above (p. 31); it is behaviour typical of a Comic Hero, and at the same time, it furnishes the comic basis of the scene.

Despite his harshness to those subject to his domination, Argan is regularly the dupe of those willing to humour him. This is obvious from the very first scene of the play, in which he enumerates the medicines taken over the past few weeks. There is a somewhat numerical flavour to his monologue; Argan alternates between how many medicines he has taken, and how much money they have cost him:

> Vingt et quarante sols. Trois et deux font cinq, et cinq font dix, et dix font vingt. Soixante et trois livres, quatre sols, six deniers. Si bien donc que de ce mois j'ai pris une, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept et huit médecines; et un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf, dix, onze et douze lavements...
> (I, i)

Clearly, if Argan is not profiting from his treatment, his doctors are. For all his careful calculation of totals, Argan seems unaware of the fact that he is being duped.

Argan actually believes his health to depend on the number of treatments which he takes. In the same scene, I, i, after discovering that in the present month he has taken less medication than in the previous one, he concludes: "Je ne m'étonne pas si je ne me porte pas si bien ce mois-ci que l'autre." Yet despite his slavish respect for medicine and doctors, Argan lets himself be tricked by Toinette in her absurd disguise as a member of the Faculty; indeed, he becomes a doctor himself at the end. Here we see the naivety of the Molièresque

Comic Hero; like M. Jourdain becoming a Mamamouchi, Argan will suffer the greatest absurdities providing they are consonant with his deepest desires.

Such are the obsessions of the various Comic Heroes. We have sought to show that all of them suffer from egotism and a mania of some sort; the manias differ, but all have the same effect of blinding the comic hero to reality and causing him to act in a manner inappropriate to his situation. This we believe to be the distinctive characteristic of these individuals, and the basis of Molière's most remarkable comic scenes.

Avarice; Anti-Social and Old-Fashioned Characteristics

We will next discuss three qualities of the Comic Hero which may be lumped together. They are the ones given in the above heading: the Molièresque Comic Hero is often avaricious, anti-social, and old-fashioned in his tastes. These qualities are typical on more than one plane. They are what we might expect to find in a bourgeois of the background which we discussed in our previous chapter, and are no doubt just as characteristic of human nature in our day as of the Parisian middle-class which Molière knew. They are closely linked with the character of the Comic Hero as we have attempted to depict him in this chapter: egotistic, domineering, and obsessed. Avarice is love of money, the most lifeless of objects. It is not surprising that the comic hero is often avaricious, for this shows the extent to which his emotions and human qualities have been desiccated by devotion to his own ego. Furthermore, the possession of money represents the easiest method of subjugating those (eg. one's family) who depend on one for material support.

The fact that the comic hero is anti-social reinforces our impression

of his egocentricity and solitude: he lives in a solipsistic world from which all intrusion by other egos, all pleasure not emanating from himself, is banned. The old-fashioned tendencies of the comic hero remind us of his ego, which is an important point in his background; they show his negative side, the desire to reject all that happens without his wish and consent; they also reveal a peculiar moralising tendency in him, the wish to condemn whatever is new as being somehow immoral. This is remarkable in a person who himself is most immoral, because he wishes to frustrate and domineer over others: it reminds us of how blind the comic hero is to everything except what he wants to see. Lastly, these three failings are comic, of course. Attachment to lucre and the wish to condemn all that is new and different are peculiarities which strengthen our impression of the comic hero as a laughable and foolishly self-centred individual.

Sganarelle is perhaps the comic hero who displays these qualities to the most remarkable degree. His contempt for fashion is bitingly expressed to Ariste in a passage too long for direct quotation here (I, i, 25-48), where he sarcastically details every particularity of the dress of the young galants of the age. His conclusion is that he prefers serviceable and comfortable dress, "Ainsi qu'en ont usé sagement nos aïeux", and that he does not care what anyone else thinks:

> Et qui me trouve mal, n'a qu'à fermer les yeux.
> (I, i, 74)

What could be more expressive of our theme in this section? Sganarelle wants only bourgeois comfort in his clothing; he is egotistic enough to reject any possible opinion on the part of others; he is attached to the opinions of his

forefathers.

The moralistic side of Sganarelle is evident in such a passage as this:

> Au lieu de voir régner cette sévérité
> Qui composait si bien l'ancienne honnêteté,
> La jeunesse en ces lieux, libertine, absolue...
> (I, iii, 269-271)

How can he possibly forget his own immorality, which far exceeds that of any "jeunesse libertine"?

Sganarelle's opposition to social contact is obvious in the sequestration which he imposes on Isabelle; as to fashion in her clothing, the following passage is most expressive:

> Oh! trois et quatre fois béni soit cet édit
> Par qui des vêtements le luxe est interdit!
> Les peines des maris ne seront plus si grandes,
> Et les femmes auront un frein à leurs demandes.
> (II, vi, 533-536)

Arnolphe is subject to the same failings. In his conversation with Chrysalde (I, i), he rejects the idea of social intercourse for his wife. He has raised her to be stupid, "en clartés peu sublime", to avoid the atmosphere of a salon visited by marquis and beaux esprits, where the talk would be of cercle and ruelle and the activities centre around doux écrits in prose and verse. In rejecting this, of course, Arnolphe is rejecting a great deal of what was best and most familiar in 17th century aristocratic society. That he is old-fashioned is evident in such a scene as III, ii, where he makes Agnes read the obscurantist Maximes du Mariage, whose point of view dates back to the Dark Ages and must have been quite insupportable to the emancipated

précieuses of the 17th century.[13] Arnolphe's disapproval of what is new (and his reactionary viewpoint on feminine education) is visible in these words:

> Héroïnes du temps, Mesdames les savantes,
> Pousseuses de tendresse et de beaux sentiments,
> Je defie à la fois tous vos vers, vos romans,
> Vos lettres, billets doux, toute votre science,
> De valoir cette honnête et pudique ignorance.
> (I, iii, 244-248)

Alceste harks back to an earlier age in both literary taste and social mannerisms. He quotes a song from the time of Henri IV as being preferable to a sonnet in full-blown précieux style by Oronte[14]; he dresses in "rubans verts" rather than the more extraordinary fashions affected by the marquis; he is opposed to the great formality and artificiality of social intercourse which, historically, first became prevalent under Louis XIV and at Versailles. Philinte implies an old-fashioned element in Alceste's world-view when he says to him: "Cette grande roideur des vertus des vieux âges/Heurte trop notre siècle et les communs usages" (I, i, 153-154). Alceste's view of "modern" fashion and social style is expressed with some violence in his objurgations on the subject of Clitandre. He asks Célimène whether she is charmed by the long nail on the

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[13] Molière's version is apparently a parody of a translation made by Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin of l'Institution à Olympia by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (circa 329-389 A.D.). Contemporary commentators identified another medieval work as a possible source: Cervantes' Don Quixote. Some went back even further to accuse Molière of parodying the Ten Commandments in the Maximes (cf. Adam, Histoire..., III, 280, 288).

[14] Alceste's literary preferences no doubt would have made him appear more comical to a 17th century audience who would have found this song somewhat primitive in its simplicity. As Jouanny observes (Oeuvres, I, note 1019), Oronte smiles at it, while Philinte, having no need to restrain himself, actually laughs.

latter's little finger, by the "mérite éclatant de sa perruque blonde," his "grands canons,""l'amas de ses rubans," "les appas de sa vaste rhingrave," or "sa façon de rire et son ton de fausset."[15] Ridiculous as such a description may make Clitandre appear, we must remember that such was the style of dress and behaviour of a smart young man of the age. In rejecting this, Alceste is rejecting a good part of society at large, which in Molière's world a man does only at his peril.

Avarice is the central point in the character of Harpagon. He is a professional miser, a stock figure of comedy dating back to Plautus' Aulularia. Molière is not presenting us with a human being here so much as with the embodiment of a vice recognised as traditional and inviting material for comedy. Thus we cannot speak of Harpagon's avarice as typical of Molière's Comic Heroes in general. Nonetheless, since Harpagon is a comic hero, and since several other comic heroes betray the same vice to a lesser degree, a discussion of him will serve to remind us that this tendency is at least present in the other characters treated in this chapter.

Harpagon's avarice has a definite effect on him: it tends to make him cold and inhuman, to set him against all those who surround him. It destroys any human sympathy he might have, leading him to coldly manipulate all those over whom he has power. It is ever present in the back of his mind, and can be

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[15] Clitandre is a caricature, of course, and Molière gives him full meed of affectation. Indeed, it seems probable that in this passage, Molière would agree with Alceste in condemning the exaggerations of Clitandre's dress and manner; one of his favourite targets was always the "petit marquis" (cf. L'Impromptu de Versailles). Nonetheless, Alceste's criticism of Clitandre is to be seen in the context of his other activities: the quarrels with Oronte and Célimène, the refusal to intrigue in his lawsuit. Alceste rejects practically everything in society, not just what is exaggerated. In Molière's world, this is dangerous, for the individual is part of society, and cannot exist entirely on his own.

detected in practically everything he says and does. The anti-social and old-fashioned tendencies, which he shares with other Comic Heroes, may be traced back in his case to an unwillingness to disburse for clothes or a fashionable (and therefore expensive) style of life. For example, he strongly disapproves of his son Cléante's social life and style. He criticises the latter's "somptueux équipage"; in the same scene (I, iv), he continues in this manner: "Je voudrais bien savoir, sans parler du reste, à quoi servent tous ces rubans dont vous voilà lardé depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête, et si une demi-douzaine d'aiguillettes ne suffit pas pour attacher un haut-de-chausses." He has been saying the same to Eliante, apparently: "Je querellais hier votre soeur." When Cléante tells his father that he is supporting this style with money won by gambling, he is told that he should invest his winnings rather than spend them. Criticism of clothing is an almost infallible sign of a comic hero: as good bourgeois themselves, they cannot understand the insouciance and financial extravagance necessary to accoutre oneself in this manner.

We will cite only a few instances of Harpagon's avarice, since an exhaustive treatment of it would be a restatement of the obvious. We will examine it not primarily in itself, but in the effect which it has: it alienates him from practically all the other characters in the play. We may say that it has the same effect as the obsessions of the other Comic Heroes, for it increases Harpagon's solitude and leads him to attempt to dominate over those who surround him. Thus it is a source of alienation, a force which destroys his human relationships with others.

In his first appearance onstage, with La Flèche, Harpagon is obsessed by the 10,000 écus he has just buried in the garden, and suffers agonies over the possibility of La Flèche's knowing something about this, or even having

stolen something from him. He examines the servant's hands, his "other" hands, the pockets of his haut-de-chausses and his justaucorps. La Flèche does not submit to this with good grace: he murmurs insults under his breath, leading Harpagon to threaten him with physical violence; and as the play develops, it is La Flèche who finally steals Harpagon's cassette and makes the old man suffer mental torture. Immediately after this interview with La Flèche, Harpagon is confronted with his son and daughter, Cléante and Éliante. He suspects them of having overheard him, and proceeds to deny at great length that he has any money at all. He criticises both of them for their expenditure; announces that his intended spouse, Mariane, has one disadvantage - she lacks money; and tells Éliante that she is to marry Anselme primarily because he is wealthy and will accept her without a dowry, "sans dot." Thus hardly a word passes between father and children which has no reference to money.

We are already familiar with the later development of Harpagon's relations with Cléante: they have a furious quarrel over Cléante's borrowing in II, i; Harpagon almost has an apoplectic stroke in III, vii, where Cléante gives his ring to Mariane and offers her an expensive collation.

In the famous scene where Harpagon is preparing his soupe for Anselme (III, i), the miser treats all his assembled servants with a disquieting niggardliness. Even the faithful Maître Jacques complains about Harpagon's treatment of his horses. Earlier, Frosine has felt the same cold draught: seeking some solid reward for her services, she meets with a frosty avoidance of the subject, and comments: "Que la fièvre te serre, chien de vilain à tous les diables!"(II, v).

In short, Harpagon's vice sets all men's hands against him. He does not care, of course, for like a true comic hero, he is absorbed in his obsession to

the exclusion of all else. As he says on discovering the loss of his cassette: "Je veux faire pendre tout le monde; et si je ne retrouve mon argent, je me pendrai moi-même après." (IV, vii). It would be difficult to better summarise the limitless, and finally self-destructive, nature of the Comic Hero's obsession.

Impatience, Anger, and Violence

A common characteristic of great egotists is to lack all patience with points of view that oppose their own. Molière's egotists are representative in this respect. When opposed, they rapidly become impatient, lose their temper, and often resort to physical violence, the crudest and most obvious way of imposing one's will on others. This physical violence of course gives rise to something which it is difficult to treat in a written thesis of the present kind: slapstick stage business. Since Molière's comedies are written to be performed rather than read, there are many effects important to overall comprehension of them which lose a great deal when discussed in mere written form. The physical appearance of the players, their gestures, expressions, tone of voice, and actions are elements essential to the presentation of a Molière play. One may well imagine that in a performance by Molière's own troupe, with himself in the title role, such effects were more important than the written text itself, which is all that the reader has to deal with. While we will here treat physical violence as a character trait, we should remember that on stage it is one of the most comical effects at Molière's disposal. The impression we have of a frustrated little tyrant, snarling when crossed and striking out in all directions only to miss (sometimes to hit the wrong person), is powerfully reinforced by the visual picture offered by an accomplished actor on stage.

Sganarelle is the first of these curmudgeons. In I, ii, he is rude to all present, beginning with the mild and inoffensive Ariste, and continuing thus with Isabelle and Léonor:

ISABELLE
Vous n'avez pas sujet, que je crois...

SGANARELLE Taisez-vous.
Je vous apprendrai bien s'il faut sortir sans nous.

LÉONOR
Quoi donc, Monsieur...?

SGANARELLE
Mon Dieu, Madame, sans langage,
Je ne vous parle pas, car vous êtes trop sage.
(I, ii, 129-132)

Arnolphe is rude without reason to Chrysalde in I, i, speaking sarcastically of his advice as "ce bel argument...ce discours profond" (v, 117). He loses his temper completely with his servants in III, ii, calling them "canaille maudite" and coming close to violence:

Quiconque remûra, par la mort! je l'assomme.
(v.399)

After discussing Horace's liaison with Agnès, he cannot bear to listen to Chrysalde's words of consolation:

ARNOLPHE
Brisons là, s'il vous plaît.

CHRYSALDE
Vous êtes en courroux.
Nous en saurons la cause. (IV, viii, 1318-1319)

He loses control on other occasions also; at one point he speaks thus of the

old woman who transmitted Horace's letter to Agnes: "Ah! suppôt de Satan! execrable damnée!" (II, v, 1318).

Even Agnès is subjected to these excesses, as when Horace hands her over to Arnolphe for safe keeping; the latter apostrophises her as "friponne," "coquine," and "petit serpent," concluding that he is prepared to beat the helpless girl: "J'enrage quand je vois sa piquante froideur,/Et quelques coups de poing satisferaient mon coeur." (V, iv, 1566-1567).

Orgon is a man of limited patience. He mocks Cléante for his advice in I, iv, calling him "un docteur qu'on révère," "le seul sage et le seul éclairé," "un oracle, un Caton." He tries to end this particular discussion simply by walking out. He argues violently with his son Damis, ending by disinheriting him in a fit of rage (III, vi). He confronts the entire assembled family over the proposed marriage of Mariane to Tartuffe (IV, iii); he uses these words to his own mother: "Allez, je ne sais pas, si vous n'étiez ma mère,/Ce que je vous dirais, tant je suis en colère." (V, iii, 1693-1694). He gives several displays of attempted physical violence: with Dorine in II, ii, where the stage directions note: Il lui veut donner un soufflet et la manque; with Damis, where he exclaims "Un bâton! un bâton! Ne me retenez pas." (III, vi, 1135). Even at the end of the play, when his behaviour has apparently improved (V, iv), he is tempted to wreak physical vengeance on M. Loyal.

Don Juan is remarkable for his coldness rather than the heat of his passion: as an aristocrat and an egotist, he perhaps restrains his emotions in the service of his unworthy aims, and the image of himself which he wishes to create. Violence in Don Juan is not comic, admittedly, but it is closely connected with his egotism, since it is a method of imposing himself on others.

Even his coldness to Elvire and his father betrays a powerful though masked egotism: he cannot bear situations in which his own personality is not supreme. Thus his reaction to such scenes is violent, at bottom, though we do not see this immediately. When his father leaves after their interview, Don Juan shouts after him: "Eh! mourez le plus tôt que vous pourrez, c'est le mieux que vous puissiez faire."(IV, v). He descends to physical violence with Pierrot when the latter finds him caressing Charlotte (II, iii). The unfortunate peasant attempts to push himself between the Don and his fiancée, whereupon he receives a series of soufflets from Don Juan, who cannot brook any opposition when he is in pursuit of his own satisfaction.

It is with Sganarelle that Don Juan's tendency to authoritarianism and violence shows itself most clearly. Here the Don reveals similarities to other Comic Heroes, for he reacts violently when Sganarelle challenges his point of view or his authority. But he is coldly tyrannical rather than comic: if there is any comic relief in these scenes, it is provided by the cowardliness of Sganarelle. Thus at Sganarelle's first mention of the bad end to which libertins are likely to come, Don Juan cuts him short: "Holà, maître sot, vous savez que je vous ai dit que je n'aime pas les faiseurs de remontrances." (I, ii). When Don Juan is attacked by Elvire (I, iii), he is nonplussed, and forces Sganarelle to answer for him. Sganarelle hesitates only momentarily, for it is clear that the Don will beat him if he does not try to save the situation. After seeing the statue of the Commander, Sganarelle expresses his joy that it might be a sign from heaven to save his master. The latter interrupts him thus:

Écoute. Si tu m'importunes davantage de tes sottes moralités, si tu me dis encore le moindre mot là-dessus, je vais appeler quelqu'un, demander un nerf de boeuf, te faire tenir par trois ou quatre, et te rouer de mille coups. (IV, iii)

After the interview with Don Louis, Sganarelle is about to remonstrate with his master, only to receive this response:

SGANARELLE

Monsieur...

DON JUAN se lève de son siège

J'ai tort? (IV , vi)

From the above instances, we may see that Don Juan is a typical Comic Hero in his resort to physical violence when threatened with opposition. It must be admitted that he goes beyond the other Comic Heroes in this respect, however; witness the cruel game he plays with Sganarelle in IV, vii, where he sees the latter's cheek swollen with some food he has stolen, and threatens to have the cheek lanced for an abscess. In face of this trait, we scarcely know whether to be amused or shocked; this, indeed, reflects the difficulty of interpreting the entire play.

Alceste's anger, like Harpagon's avarice, is a trait so often seen that we hardly need to detail instances of it.[16] We have noted above (p.188) several examples of his choler. He swears constantly. His speeches in the printed text are full of exclamation marks;[17] he piles up nouns and adjectives in an attempt to

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[16] Jouanny (Oeuvres, I, note 987) recalls a detail of the actor Molé's interpretation of Alceste. Molé (1734-1802) threw himself into a chair, then, on the line "Moi, je veux me fâcher, et ne veux point entendre" (v. 5), rose, breaking the chair and turning his back on Philinte. Jouanny finds this excessive; but it demonstrates the force of anger which a distinguished actor wished to display in Alceste.

[17] In the space of 28 lines (II, 1492-1520), there are no less than 14 exclamation marks.

overwhelm opposition by the sheer volume of his words. In the very first scene of the play, he enters in the middle of a quarrel with Philinte. His language is characteristically tempestuous in this scene (I, i); it is interesting simply to list some of the adjectives which he applies to mankind in the course of just one scene. Here is a selection of them: "corrompu," "indigne," "lâche," "infâme," "frivole," "inutile," "honteux," "odieux," "méchant," "malfaisant," "sale," "misérable," "scélérat," "pervers." He gives an extremely violent description of his oponent in the lawsuit, whom he finds to be among other things a "franc scélérat," a "traître," and a "pied plat." His treatment of Oronte is well-known: it leads him into a serious quarrel. He roundly condemns the activities in Célimène's salon: "Allons, ferme, poussez, mes bons amis de cour;/ Vous n'en épargnez point, et chacun a son tour." (II, iv, 651-652). When he is commanded to meet with Oronte to settle their dispute, he exclaims furiously:

> Hors qu'un commandement exprès du Roi me vienne
> De trouver bons les vers dont on se met en peine,
> Je soutiendrai toujours, morbleu! qu'ils sont mauvais,
> Et qu'un homme est pendable après les avoir faits.
> (II vi, 769-772)

Immediately after this, he addresses this remark, apparently threatening physical violence, to Acaste and Clitandre, who are standing by laughing:

> Par la sangbleu! Messieurs, je ne croyais pas être
> Si plaisant que je suis. (Ibid., 773-774)

Alceste will not spare even ladies the roughness of his tongue. After Éliante's famous set-piece speech of II, iv, in which she describes how even the least-favoured woman has an attraction for her lover, he begins intemperately

"Et moi, je soutiens, moi..."; however, Célimène saves the day be interrupting him. Célimène herself is constantly subject to reproach; we may cite IV, ii, where he refers to a letter which she has sent to Oronte apparently expressing a liking for the latter. Célimène asks Alceste what is wrong; he replies:

> Que le sort, les démons, et le Ciel en courroux
> N'ont jamais rien produit de si méchant que vous.
> (IV, iii, 1281-1284)

He seems, indeed, to be on the point of losing control completely:

> Mes sens par la raison ne sont plus gouvernés,
> Je cède aux mouvements d'une juste colère,
> Et je ne réponds pas de ce que je puis faire.
> (Ibid., 1312-1314)

Arsinoé, when she offers her affection to Alceste once too often, meets with this rebuff: "ce n'est pas à vous que je pourrai songer,/Si par un autre choix je cherche à me venger." (V, iv, 1721-1722). Anger is Alceste's most characteristic emotion; we may leave him with a quotation which, coming from his own mouth, gives a very just description of him: "Je ne suis plus à moi, je suis tout à la rage." (IV, iii, 1310).

Harpagon regularly loses control. His very first speech in L'Avare is directed at La Flèche:

> Hors d'ici tout à l'heure, et qu'on ne réplique pas. Allons
> que l'on détale de chez moi, maître juré filou, vrai gibier de potence.
> (I, iii)

Several times in this scene he is on the point of striking the unhappy servant. He has an open quarrel with shameful insults in II, ii, where he and Cléante confront one another, and finishes by shouting: "Ote-toi de mes yeux, coquin!

ôte-toi de mes yeux!" With Cléante again, this time fighting over Mariane, he calls for a stick (IV, iii). He goes so far as to regret that Valère saved Élise from drowning when he discovers that they are in love: "il valait bien mieux pour moi qu'il te laissât noyer que de faire ce qu'il a fait." (V, iv). Harpagon's intemperance indeed passes the bounds of the comic; it is a reflection of his stark and caricatural inhumanity.

M. Jourdain displays on several occasions a tendency towards shortness of temper. In one scene in particular (III, ii), he almost descends to violence, and with a woman, what is more. Nicole is the unfortunate person in question: when Jourdain is confronted with an outburst of laughter from her, he addresses her in these terms:

> Tiens, si tu ris encore le moins du monde, je te jure que je t'appliquerai sur la joue le plus grand soufflet qui se soit jamais donné.

This threat indeed is carried out when he perceives her eavesdropping on his conversation with Dorante (III, vi). The stage directions note: MONSIEUR JOURDAIN, s'aperçoit que Nicole écoute, et lui donne un soufflet. Thus even the comparatively joyous atmosphere of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme does not prevent the Comic Hero from occasionally reverting to type.

With Argan we return to the familiar climate of excess. He tells the notaire quite blankly that he wishes to deprive his children of their legitimate part in the inheritance and give it to Béline: "Comment puis-je faire, s'il vous plaît, pour lui donner mon bien, et en frustrer mes enfants?" Such hardness is the result of his obsession, for he takes this attitude to his children simply because of their opposition to his wishes. Of course, Argan is not a weak man by any means; his constitution resists even the enfeeblement which he attributes

to it because of his hypochondria. Occasionally his real nature bursts through, as when Béralde approaches him at a moment when he is complaining of his weakness:

ARGAN
Je n'ai pas seulement la force de pouvoir parler.

BERALDE
J'étais venu ici, mon frère, vous proposer un parti pour ma nièce Angélique.

ARGAN, parlant avec emportement, et se levant de sa chaise.
Mon frère, ne me parlez point de cette coquine-là. C'est une friponne, une impertinente, une effrontée, que je mettrai dans un couvent avant qu'il soit deux jours. (II, ix)

With Béralde again, in III, iii, he has a violent argument over the value of doctors and medicine, into which Molière himself is eventually introduced by name. Argan comments thus on Molière's reasons for not trusting doctors:

Les sottes raisons que voilà! Tenez, mon frère, ne parlons point de cet homme-là davantage, car cela m'échauffe la bile, et vous me donneriez mon mal.

With Angélique, when she attempts to oppose his plans for her marriage, he is abrupt and definite: "Écoute, il n'y a point de milieu à cela: choisis d'épouser dans quatre jours, ou Monsieur, ou un couvent." (II, vi). His tendency to physical violence is shown with Toinette (who, as we need hardly add, is a woman). In I, v, he pursues her around the room with a stick in his hand: ARGAN, en colère, court après elle autour de sa chaise, son bâton à la main. In I, vi, where she teases him about the pillows disposed around his person, he reacts thus:

ARGAN, se lève en colère, et jette tous les oreillers à Toinette.
Ah! coquine, tu veux m'étouffer.

Despite his supposed illness, Argan is no different from other Molièresque Comic Heroes when it comes to chastising people who irritate him.

Good Qualities

After detailing the Comic Hero's faults, we may briefly mention his good qualities. There is always a redeeming feature in these men, something which makes them appear a little more human. We make especial mention of this, since it tends to support our analysis of the nature of the Comic Hero in Molière. We have suggested that the Comic Hero is an otherwise normal man afflicted by an obsession which becomes so deeply rooted in his personality that the two are almost indistinguishable. When we are aware that the comic hero is normal, we see more clearly that his obsession is a temporary or aberrant state; therefore we see more clearly the nature and consequences of his peculiarity. Only if we are given an idea of normality can we realise what abnormality is. The comic hero's good qualities therefore enable us to understand his peculiarities better. Furthermore, these qualities prevent him from sinking to the level of simple mechanical puppets. Molière's comic heroes are human beings, like almost all the characters in his plays; their obsession is not the sum total of their personality and this renders them at once more acceptable and more comic. More acceptable because by reason of their good qualities, they share in the atmosphere of joyous humanity which inspires most of Molière's works: few authors present a picture of the world which is as happy, joyously comic and constuctive as Molière.[18] More comic

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[18] It may be claimed that Molière, along with many other authors of the 17th century, presents an essentially pessimistic view of the human condition. His Comic Heroes, after all, are men who are afflicted by egomania, and never renounce their bad old ways in order to change at the end of the play (though we must except Orgon from this general rule). Thus we are left with the impression that man is incorrigible and unchanging in his vice. Yet it must be admitted that only a very serious person could leave a performance of for example Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme with a feeling of depression over the fact that M. Jourdain does not change. The general atmosphere of these works is joyfully comic, and this enables Molière to effectively mask what perhaps is an underlying attitude of pessimism.

because they are not automata: when Harpagon for example becomes too mechanical in his obsession, he comes close to the bounds of tragedy. The good qualities of Molière's comic heroes keep them within the limits of the comic: a man obsessed by one desire to the utter exclusion of all else would become a tragic lunatic.

Arnolphe's redeeming feature is that he is actually capable of love. Though he forgets Agnès's right to liberty, yet he sincerely loves her. After hearing her letter to Horace, he exclaims: "cependant je l'aime, après ce lâche tour,/Jusqu'à ne me pouvoir passer de cet amour." (III, v, 998-999). Even at the height of his rage and indignity at the end of the play, he speaks quite touchingly of love: "Chose étrange d'aimer, et que pour ces traîtresses/ Les hommes soient sujets à de telles faiblesses!" (V, iv, 1572-1573).

Orgon is capable of friendship even if danger is involved, as we see from the fact that he keeps the cassette of Argas (V, i), which almost involves him in charges of treason. He is a passionate man who oscillates from one extreme to the other; it is almost endearing to see the shock with which he receives proof of Tartuffe's treachery, and then makes a prompt about-face in opinion:

> C'en est fait, je renonce à tous les gens de bien:
> J'en aurai désormais une horreur effroyable.
> Et m'en vais devenir pour eux pire qu'un diable.
> (V, i, 1604-1606)

The reconciliation scene between Orgon and Damis (V, ii), both men of unruly temperament, and violently opposed just a short time ago, shows a delicate appreciation on the part of Molière of the relationship between father and son. Again, when Orgon is reconciled with the rest of his family, it is moving to see how they draw together, and how Orgon rushes to attack an intruder such as M. Loyal.

Don Juan is a man of courage and a peculiar kind of honour. Though he thinks nothing of being immoral when it is to his own advantage, yet his honour is important to him on occasion, as when he springs to the aid of the beleaguered Don Carlos, observing: "Notre propre honneur est intéressé dans de pareilles aventures." (III, iii). He never flinches before the statue of the Commandeur, taking his defiance to the very end, death itself.

Alceste, even if only out of egotism, is honourable and sincere. He refuses to take the easy way out of a situation; to praise Oronte's sonnet, or to sit and listen to the backbiting in Célimène's salon. Also he sincerely loves Célimène, though in a scarcely orthodox way. Shocked by her betrayal, he still invites her to retire into the "désert" with him, and finally renounces her only when she refuses to take this rather drastic step.

Little can be said in favour of Harpagon from the moral point of view. However, this starkest of Molière's characters does possess intelligence, if that can be regarded as a redeeming feature. He manages to catch Cléante out quite easily by pretending that he, Harpagon, no longer wishes to marry Mariane, and asking what Cléante would think of her as a wife. The young man is thus tricked into revealing his feelings towards the girl.

M. Jourdain, as we have observed, is the most innocuous of Molière's comic heroes. This perhaps explains the lack of any significant counter-balancing features in him: one cannot point at any unequivocally good characteristics. It is doubtless unnecessary to remind us of the humanity of a character whose obsession and egotism are never really so strong as to put that humanity in doubt.

Argan, finally, betrays a human side on several occasions. He is not devoid of insight into the character of young girls, even of philosophy, as we see from his manner of broaching the subject of marriage to Angélique: "Cela est plaisant, oui, ce mot de mariage; il n'y a rien de plus drôle pour les

jeunes filles: ah! nature! nature!" (I, v). As for the scene in which he questions his little daughter Louison (II, viii), it is classic for the period. The appearance of a child on the stage in the 17th. century is in itself rare enough; but the games in which Argan indulges with the girl, his pretended threats and eventual kindness, provide a remarkable monument to Molière's humanity and powers of psychological observation.

Anselme, Trufaldin, and Pandolfe of L'Etourdi

Before concluding this chapter, we should add a few words on the above characters, whom we have consistently attempted to see as the ancestors of our major comic heroes. In character, of course, they are not as well developed as those who follow them; but in such an early play, where Molière is far from finding any style which would resemble that of his later periods, even the slightest indications are of value.

Of obsession and the blindness resulting from it, there is not a great deal in this play. None of our three characters is so wrapped up in himself that he begins to seriously misinterpret what is happening to him. It is true however that they are all tricked by Mascarille, who succeeds in his strategems by selecting the kind of story which would appeal to each of them as individuals. Thus Anselme is apparently enamoured of a certain Nérine (I, v); Mascarille engages his attention by telling him how much she loves him, though she has not dared to reveal it, and at the same time quietly removes Anselme's purse. He almost tricks Pandolfe (until interrupted by Lélie) by telling the latter that he (Mascarille) disapproves of Lélie's conduct and lack of respect for his father. He informs Pandolfe (I, vii) that Lélie loves a certain slave (i.e. Célie: this information is true), and that the only method of stopping this affair is to buy the slave and remove her from the country. Pandolfe is only too willing to believe this story because he wants his son to marry Hippolyte and is eager to remove all obstacles to this end. Mascarille's intent of

course is to kidnap Célie and hand her over to Lélie; unfortunately, he is again interrupted by the blundering Lélie. Trufaldin is also subjected to a stratagem on the part of Mascarille (IV, i, ii): Lélie masquerades as an Armenian merchant who has seen Trufaldin's long-lost son Albert during his travels. The plan is to get access to Trufaldin's house by this method; it works very well until Lélie gives the game away by talking to Célie in a loud voice and being overheard.

Thus we see that these individuals all have certain interests which they believe in strongly, to the point that they can be tricked by someone who is wily enough to humour them. From here it is not a great step to the obsessive comic hero who believes whatever suits his own convictions.

The attempt to dominate others can be seen clearly in these characters. Pandolfe wishes to marry his son Lélie to Hippolyte in order to control the young man's behaviour, which he finds unseemly. Mascarille describes the situation thus:

> Il est avec Anselme en parole pour vous
> Que de son Hippolyte on vous fera l'époux,
> S'imaginant que c'est dans le seul mariage
> Qu'il pourra rencontrer de quoi vous faire sage
> (I, ii, 37-40)

In the meantime, he is keeping Lélie on a short rein. Anselme conversely tries to arrange the marriage of Hippolyte to Lélie; while Trufaldin actually has Célie as a slave, over whom he keeps close watch, as Lélie observes:

> ...Trufaldin pour elle
> Fait de nuit et de jour exacte sentinelle.
> (I, ii, 107-108)

He will not even let her speak to anyone:

> TRUFALDIN, à Célie
> Que faites-vous dehors, et quel soin vous talonne,
> Vous à qui je defénds de parler à personne?
> (I, iv, 127-128)

In fact, Célie represents an article of commerce to Trufaldin, for he has bought her and intends to sell her again as soon as possible, which is why he watches so closely. In II, vii, he actually sells her to Lélie: we are reminded of the later comic heroes who regard their children not as human beings, but as objects to be rearranged to the convenience of the pater-families.

These characters also display avarice in a considerable degree. Mascarille describes Trufaldin as a "vrai ladre...qui se ferait fesser pour moins d'un quart d'écu." (I, ii, 97-98). Pandolfe is not demonstrably miserly, but certainly keeps money from his son. Mascarille describes him as "un autre vilain qui ne vous laisse pas...manier ses ducats." (I, ii, 101-102). Anselme is a plain case of affection for lucre: in I, v, he has just returned from collecting a debt, and speaks of financial matters in terms which betray an over-riding interest:

> Par mon chef, c'est un siècle étrange que le nôtre!
> J'en suis confus: jamais tant d'amour pour le bien,
> Et jamais tant de peine à retirer le sien.
> (I, v, 204-206)

When tricked by Mascarille into giving money for the supposed funeral of Pandolfe, he seeks with great energy to recover it, and rejoices when he succeeds: "Enfin je vous raccroche,/Mon argent bien aimé: rentrez dedans ma poche." (II, v, 651-652). Love of money in these men, while a typical comic trait, indicates disregard for others, more human, aspects of life. It develops into the cold inhumanity sometimes displayed by the later comic heroes.

Of impatience and violence we may quote only one example: that of Trufaldin, who is constantly surly and eventually joins with Mascarille in inflicting physical punishment on Lélie. Previously in a well-known speech he describes with loving detail, indicative of anticipated pleasure in causing physical pain, the stick with which he intends to beat Mascarille: "Propre,

comme je pense, à rosser les épaules,/Car il est bien en main, vert, noueux, et massif." (IV, v, 1555-1556).

Thus we see embryonic traits even in these slight portrayals which may be traced in the later development of the fully-fledged comic hero.

Conclusion

In this important chapter, we have sought to recreate the character of the Comic Hero as we see him in our chosen comedies. While admitting individual variations, we have taken characteristics which we feel to be common to most or all of the Comic Heroes, in an attempt to understand how and why such an individual is of central importance to Molière's comic world. The most salient characteristic of these men, we have suggested, is their obsession, an infatuation with some particular point of view or psychological attitude which is present, though under varying forms, in every one of them. Don Juan's vanity, M. Jourdain's social ambitions, Harpagon's avarice, though obviously different on the surface, are vices which have the same ultimate effect on the Comic Hero, and consequently, on those who surround him.

The Comic Heroes are all obsessed; by extension, they are egotistic. As we have observed, it is sometimes difficult to separate the two, or to say which has preponderant influence. Is Alceste in favour of sincerity because he wishes to be distinguished by sincere praise, or does he become authoritarian towards others, not because of their attitude towards himself, but because they do not measure up to his standards of behaviour for all mankind? Whatever the solution to this, it remains true that the Comic Heroes are both obsessive and egotistic. To this we may add certain qualities which betray a negative turn of mind: avarice (love of money or possessions, which implies love of power over other people); distaste for society (unwillingness to submit oneself to the judgments of others); opposition to fashion (refusal to change with the

changing times). A tendency to anger and violence is also discernible in them: this is the typical reaction of a frustrated petty tyrant when opposed in his wishes.

Balancing the above to some extent are the good qualities which are to be found in almost all the Comic Heroes; these, we suggest, prevent them from sinking completely to the level of caricature, remind us that they are human beings, though somewhat larger than life, and thus increase the comic pleasure which we get from them.

Such is our view of the Comic Hero's character. The point of central importance, we suggest, is his obsession. This is the unfailing sign of a Comic Hero; in Bergsonian terms, it is characterised as rigidity. To us, it is an example of closed psychology rather than rigidity. We do not see the Comic Hero primarily as inflexible, incapable of bending from the straight and preconceived line of conduct which he has mapped out for himself. Such an interpretation would leave us with a rather mechanical impression of these comedies. We therefore prefer to conceive of the Comic Hero as a man with a closed mind, a circular rather than linear psychology, if we may use these terms. He is infatuated with himself and his pet obsession; he lives in and for his own mind, pursuing his own projects to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. This, we suggest, gives rise to two comic effects: actions inappropriate to the realities of a situation; and self-defeating activities undertaken in complete innocence. In either case, anyone but the obsessive Comic Hero would notice that the confusion arises from his pursuit of a fixed idea, which bears no relation to the obvious desires of the other person.

These comic effects, and those cited in the body of this chapter, are of central importance in our nine plays. Since they rest on the blindness of the Comic Hero, without which precondition they would be incomprehensible or incredible, it seems clear that this blindness is perhaps the most useful key

to the understanding of Molière's comic effects. Thus our analysis of the Comic Hero's character tends to support our basic thesis: the supreme importance of the Comic Hero in the work of Molière. We may now proceed to our last chapter, in which we shall attempt to recapitulate and summarise the theoretical basis of our approach to Molière's comedies.

Chapter X: Conclusion

In the preceding pages, we have sought to present a general interpretation of nine plays of Molière. Starting with the fundamental conception of a Comic Hero, we have traced the influence of this individual through various aspects of our plays. We have seen the Comic Hero as the dramatic centre of our works, the individual around whom all the other characters revolve, and whom they tend to reveal to us. We have tried to show that he is the source of many of Molière's best comic effects; we have also suggested that a moral theme may be traced in his gradual loss of power and authority.

Let us briefly review the steps of our argument. In our Introduction we stated the grounds on which we selected a number of Comic Heroes and the plays in which they appear. The central feature of these men's personality, we suggested, was their egotism or obsession with some particular and personal mania. Despite their sometimes obvious differences in physical background, even in character, they all share this trait. They invariably act in a selfish, inwardly directed fashion; they do not live and let live, but seek rather to dominate their surroundings and rearrange them to their own satisfaction. It is this egotism which distinguishes the Molièresque Comic Hero from other people; as the Comic Hero dominates the play, so does his obsession dominate him.

Our chapters on the five groups had a twofold aim: to demonstrate the dramatic importance of the Comic Hero, insofar as the other characters are less significant than him and revolve within his orbit; and to clarify the conception of his character that we are attempting to present. Each group reveals a somewhat different aspect of the Comic Hero, and each of these aspects contributes a further element to the overall impression that we gain of him. The Young People make us aware of his egotism by showing it in action, in his

attempts to manipulate them. We hear him expose a philosophy of egocentrism in his discussions with the Raisonneurs, and see the contrast which his character forms with that of a rational and moderate man of the world. The Wives show us something of his background of relatively placid bourgeois normality, letting us surmise what he might have been like if his obsession had not rendered him abnormal. The Servants show us his weak side, either by engaging in open confrontation with him as the female servants do, or by playing on his obsession and thus tricking him, as the men do. The Caricatures reinforce this impression of weakness by demonstrating how easily the Comic Hero can be deceived and led by the nose, if one is only willing to humour him in his obsession.

Having gathered together these different strands into a general portrait of the Comic Hero, we passed on to an examination of this individual in himself, so as to complement what we see of him from outside by a study of himself alone and without reference to other people. In Background, we found him to be a fairly typical bourgeois of the XVII century: a man of mature age and substantial material possessions, surrounded by a household which is comprised of servants, wife, young people, raisonneurs, and parasites or caricatures in varying combinations. In character we suggested that the central element of his nature is his obsession, with the consequent blindness to everything that does not come within the immediate scope of his interests. He is often avaricious, anti-social, and old-fashioned; he has tendencies towards impatience, anger, and even violence. Despite all this, he usually has certain redeeming qualities which prevent him from sinking to the level of a mechanical puppet and remind us that he is still essentially a human being.

In all our above remarks, we have stressed the similarities of the 11 Comic Heroes selected for treatment here. We have no intention of claiming that Alceste for example is an exact likeness of Harpagon, or that Sganarelle of L'École des Maris resembles M. Jourdain in every detail. Clearly, there are differences, and important differences. If it were not so, Molière's plays would be much less diverse and varied than they in fact are. Despite all their differences, however, we are convinced that the Comic Heroes do display striking similarities, and that these similarities considerably outweigh the differences. It is easy to point out that Arnolphe is obsessed with cuckoldry, and Argan, on the other hand, with his health; that M. Jourdain is a bourgeois, and Don Juan an aristocrat; that Sganarelle is comparatively young, and Harpagon old. But such differences are superficial rather than fundamental; furthermore, any general interpretation of our chosen works is precluded if we choose simply to detail the ways in which these individuals differ from one another. Thus we stress the similarities rather than the differences, beginning with what we consider to be the all-important point of resemblance: the Comic Hero's obsession.

We suggest that it is this point of obsession which makes all the Comic Heroes brothers under the skin, and which provides a thread by which we can link together various parts of an apparently diverse artistic creation. Harpagon is a miser, Don Juan an egotist, Alceste a misanthrope: these failings may appear to be quite different in nature. Yet the effect which each particular vice has on the Comic Hero's nature, and on his behaviour towards others, is essentially the same. All Molière's Comic Heroes are concerned almost exclusively with themselves and the particular obsession which engages them. As we have already observed, it is almost impossible

to separate these two ideas: is Alceste, for example, concerned primarily with improving society, or with extorting from other people a greater measure of respect for himself? Is Don Juan really a philanderer and minor philosopher, or simply a cold aristocratic egotist who wishes to leave the mark of his personality on the lives of others?

We will not attempt to resolve this difficulty. In the final analysis, it is not important, for we are concerned more with the Comic Hero's behaviour, the external expression of his psychology, than with a precise identification of the causes thereof. It is sufficient to say that Molière's Comic Heroes all suffer from the same failing: an excessive preoccupation with their own point of view. As a result of this, they all behave in remarkably similar fashion. The two most significant aspects of this behaviour, we have suggested, are the moral and the comic aspects.

To begin with the moral question. We disclaimed in our Introduction any intention of assigning a moral purpose to Molière. It seems highly unlikely that he portrayed Harpagon in order to stop people from being misers, or Argan in order to shame hypochondriacs. Molière could not seriously have imagined that any sinner would change his habits after spending three hours in a playhouse. A number of more plausible reasons may be found for the composition of his plays: the desire to earn a living, to distinguish himself as an author, or simply to practise the occupation which pleased him most in life.

While admitting all this, we still feel that a moral purpose may be traced in the works which contain a Comic Hero. This purpose is never stated, perhaps because such a statement would be inartistic; but we are persuaded that it can be seen in the inevitable decline and fall of the Comic

Hero. In every play with which we deal here, the Comic Hero begins in a position of authority, where he can give full rein to his egotism and treat other people despotically. As the action develops, the threat to his authority grows, until at last he is stripped of his former power and forced to allow everyone else to do what they want without reference to him. This, quite simply, is what happens in a Molière play.

Plot as such, we have seen, does not concern Molière. He uses it in two principal ways: to show different aspects of the Comic Hero's nature by putting him in a number of varied situations; and to show his decline from a position of egotistic self-assertiveness to one where he has final authority over no-one but himself.

If we adopt this second point of view, we may see the plot of a Molière play as a revolt against the Comic Hero. Usually the Young People are the cause of this, for it is chiefly they whom the Comic Hero is able to reduce to subjection. In their plight, they turn to someone - Servant, Wife, or Raisonneur - who is able to help them. A stratagem of some kind is then generally instigated (most often by the Servants), and this tricks the Comic Hero into yielding or simply losing his authority. Such is the common progression of a Molière plot.

The Comic Hero at the end is only physically deprived, of course. Psychologically, he does not change.[1] This is true to life, no doubt, since

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[1]Only Orgon, of all our Comic Heroes, undergoes a change of heart at the end of Tartuffe. He is forced, though, almost regretfully, to regard Tartuffe's character in a truer light:

> Quoi! sous un beau semblant de ferveur si touchante
> Cacher un coeur si double, une âme si méchante!
> Et moi qui l'ai reçu gueusant et n'ayant rien ...
> (V, i, 1601-1603)

men of mature age are unlikely to undergo a radical transformation in their way of thought. It is also perhaps an effect of the 17th century's basically pessimistic view of the human condition, according to which amour-propre is an ineradicable vice which lies at the root of our nature. This fact may go some way towards explaining Molière's often surprising dénouements. A Molière comedy quite commonly ends with a totally unexpected family reunion, bringing together individuals who previously seemed to have no inter-connection whatsoever, or with an extraordinary charade of music and dance designed to elevate the Comic Hero into a fantasy-world of wish-fulfilment. While such situations would be unlikely in real life, it must be observed that they are perfectly acceptable as part of a theatrical convention. In the first place, they harmonise very well with the atmosphere of light unreality which one tends to expect in the world of the stage; in the second, they provide elements such as music, dancing, costume, even surprise and amusement, which contribute to our pleasure at the performance in general. More significant for our present purposes, however, are the conclusions which may be drawn from these dénouements with regard to the Comic Hero. The fact is that they provide a means of bringing the play to an end without necessitating any change in the Comic Hero's psychology. The "family reunion" type of ending takes matters out of the Comic Hero's hands, by putting the Young People out of his power. He would still like to organise their lives, no doubt, but no longer has the capability of doing so. The "fantasy" ending is a charade which appeals to his obsession, his deepest desires: he becomes a doctor, an aristocrat, whatever he

wants, and continues to live with the same fixed and limited purpose that has always guided his life. Thus the validity of our original point stands: the Comic Hero does not change. He is true to life.

Nor do the other characters change. In some cases, their wishes are fulfilled: the Young People get married, the Wives see their husbands return to them, but no real psychological alteration takes place. We may conclude that if there is any change or movement in a Molière play, it consists in what we have described above: the Comic Hero's gradual loss of authority. Thus another major aspect of the play can be seen to depend on the central character, the Comic Hero.

The most important aspect of a Molière play, no doubt, is the comic aspect. We discussed in our second chapter various theories of comedy in general and of Molière's comedy in particular, ending with an appreciation of Bergson's approach. This philosopher, it will be remembered, takes the idea of rigidity as the starting point for his discussion of the comic. He sees the comic character in Molière as inflexibly devoted to a certain limited attitude or course of action. Like a mechanical puppet, the comic character is incapable of deviating from a fixed and unchanging course of action. This becomes only too obvious to us through the contrast which the Comic Hero's behaviour makes with the fluid, ever-changing nature of life itself; our surprise or amusement is expressed in laughter, which thus acts as a social corrective tending to bring back the errant individual into the fold of normal behaviour. Bergson cites in particular three examples of Molière's technique: repetition, inversion, and interference of series. These are in fact, we may observe here, operations which could be carried out by a machine (though at this point they

would cease to be funny, since Bergson remarks that we laugh only when the object of our amusement contains a human element). Nevertheless, it remains true that Bergson's comic character is a man who acts like a machine: to act like a human being, in Bergsonian terms, would be to avoid all rigidity and inflexibility, and thus to stop being funny.

We propose here what we feel to be a different interpretation of the Comic Hero (and, by extension, of a good part of Molière's comedy in general). We see him not as mechanical, but as intensely human. A machine has no individuality or self-awareness: but it is precisely in this that the Comic Hero surpasses Molière's other characters. As we have many times suggested, the Comic Hero is a man obsessed. This obsession takes many different forms in different individuals, but its effect is always the same: it renders the Comic Hero egotistic and self-centred, absorbed in his own interests, to the exclusion of all else, and eager to impose his wishes on all who surround him. The direct consequence of this is that the Comic Hero becomes blind to all that has no direct and obvious relationship to his obsession. He is trapped in the prison of his own head, pursuing his own chimerical and illusory vision of the world; he sees external reality only dimly and as it were half-hidden behind the veil of his ego. He creates his own world, in fact, and tries to live in it, according to rules which are not valid in the world of other people.

It is at this point that the Comic Hero becomes amusing. We have suggested that our laughter has a twofold inspiration: firstly, we laugh at the discrepancy between what the Comic Hero thinks or does (following his own interpretation of the world), and what he ought to do (if he were to respond

to the requirements of the situation). The finest moments are produced when the Comic Hero actually begins to controvert his own purposes. For example, he may have a fixed opinion of the moral recitude of someone (perhaps a young man or woman) who in fact is doing his best to deceive the Comic Hero. By his brusqueness or iron determination to impose his own point of view, he may antagonize those who in spite of all are still not entirely opposed to him. Strenuous efforts to preserve his health may tend, through their very exaggeration, to make him ill; the overwhelming desire to act like an aristocrat may make him the laughing-stock of aristocrat and bourgeois alike.

We laugh at the Comic Hero for a secondary, perhaps less important, reason: we feel pleasure in the defeat of his plans to tyrannise over others. It is gratifying to watch the women servants confront him in verbal duels; to see the Young People escape from his power; to watch the incredible tricks which both men and women servants play on him in order to make him renounce his authority. There is a moral element here, for we are pleased to see the tables turned on one who sought to lord it over everybody else. Yet these scenes remain comic, for they are never really cruel. The Comic Hero is stripped of his unjustly assumed powers, but as gently as possible, so that even the moral element remains within the general atmosphere of gaiety and laughter which characterises Molière's comedies.

We suggest therefore that the Comic Hero is amusing in himself because of his moral and spiritual blindness. But since the Comic Hero is the centre of gravity of the works in which he appears, his influence may be traced in other comic aspects of the plays, which at first sight might appear to have no direct connection with him. We attempted in the early chapters of this thesis

to show how the Comic Hero dominates theme and structure of the plays, and how the other characters revolve around him. The consequence of this is that many comic effects are drawn from the relationship between the Comic Hero and other characters. The Parasites, for example, are often scarcely plausible individuals in themselves; in combination with the Comic Hero, they fulfil a definite dramatic function, for they serve to reveal the Comic Hero's gullibility with people who are clever enough to humour him. The Parasites may indulge in the most ridiculous excesses of behaviour; we accept them without question, for we realise that they behave thus with the intention of pleasing the Comic Hero. The more absurd their contortions, the more we become aware of the blindness of the Comic Hero, who is taken in by all this.

We do not laugh at the Parasites simply because they are caricatural representations of a certain vice carried to excess. If this were the case, they would merely be contributing a further, but essentially disparate, element to our general amusement. The fact is that these individuals are closely linked to the central purpose of our chosen plays: the revelation of the Comic Hero. In their relationship with him, we see an explanation of their excesses, and we are both amused and astonished over the Comic Hero's failure to recognize them for what they are.

Much the same might be said of the Servants. A great deal of the pleasure which we take in the women servants arises from the scenes in which they confront or trick the Comic Hero; as for the menservants, their chief role often is to act as instigators of a stratagem, usually wildly improbable, which is directed against the Comic Hero and in fact is only comprehensible in the context of his delusions. The Wives, again, give us their best comic

moments when reacting to their husbands' erratic ways. The Raisonneurs and Young People contribute less to the comic atmosphere of our plays, but when they do appear in a comic light, it is generally in the presence of the Comic Hero, who causes a reaction in them just as he does in everyone else. So it is that the Comic Hero becomes the direct or indirect source of most of Molière's comic effects in our plays. Not only is he more comic in himself than any other individual: he provides the impetus for the comic activities of other groups and individuals. We may conclude that the Comic Hero is of supreme importance in the comic structure of Molière's plays, just as he is in their thematic and dramatic structure.

Thus concludes our study of nine plays of Molière. In these pages, we have attempted to trace many apparently diverse aspects of Molière's artistic creation back to one central individual, and, even further back, to the essential psychological peculiarity which makes him what he is. If we have succeeded in this, then we have only provided a further demonstration of the quality of Molière's art. If we can show that Molière makes everything in his plays flow from one central conception, then we are left with an impression of unity and artistic purity which one might expect in classical tragedy rather than comedy. More than this: Molière is a psychologist, for he takes as his point of departure a psychological peculiarity of the Comic Hero: his obsession. In doing this, he discovered and portrayed for the first time a psychological type: so that we are made aware of Molière's originality, and of his spiritual profundity in observing and portraying a mentality which nobody before him had portrayed in such depth. Finally, we retain an impression of Molière's humanity, for he has taken the most human

of all failings - egotism - and used it as a point of departure for his art. Though he seems to regard it as a vice, and eventually lets it be punished, yet he never descends to cruelty in his chastisement. The Comic Hero is never brutally jolted or humiliated: he need only yield the authority which he unjustly wields over others, and then he is allowed to continue in the solipsistic world of illusion that he has created for himself. Molière laughs indulgently at man's petty preoccupation with himself; we leave his plays with the assurance that man is not perfect, but that even so, there is more occasion for hope than for despair.

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